

Genesis 17

This chapter is a story in five acts. These are covenant, naming, circumcision, disbelief and faithful response.

Act one is Covenant. We have looked at covenant before. It is the agreement between God and Abram that if Abram is faithful, then God will bless him with land and offspring. This retelling of the covenanting moment is a much later version than the one we read about in previous weeks. It comes from a time after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon (537 BCE) and mentions kings and nations coming from Abram and Sarai. What this shows is that the covenant between Abram and God, continued to shape the self-understanding of the Hebrew people across the centuries. It reminded them that they were God's people.

Act two is naming. This version of the story contains the changing of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. The significance of the naming is not abundantly clear. It can signify that as people who have entered a covenant with God, they have become new people, with a new mission and thus need new names. It can also signify that because they are now officially God's people they need new names. From this point on in the story we will know our characters as Abraham and Sarah.

Act three is circumcision. There is little consensus as to the reason for circumcision (ritual? health?). All we know is that Abraham received the command to circumcise all males including slaves he had purchased with money. In the future all newborn males were to be circumcised at eight days of age. For those editing this story, circumcision had become one of the significant marks of belonging to the people of Israel. It assisted the community in maintaining its unique identity.

Act four is disbelief. We see this disbelief in Abraham's response to God's promise that he and Sarah will have a child. This was such an absurd promise that Abraham falls on his knees and laughs. Abraham knows how ridiculous it would be for a man who is a hundred years old to have a child with his wife who is ninety. Instead of believing this promise, Abraham asks God to make Ishmael the bearer of the Promise and the covenant. While God rejects this proposal, God still assures Abraham that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation, just as surely as their yet to be conceived child Isaac, will be.

Act five is faithful response. This is the act of circumcision. Abraham does what God has commanded and circumcises all the male members of his household along with the slaves that he had purchased. As we might imagine, this was not an action to be taken lightly. It was a painful action that demonstrated a significant commitment to God and the covenant.

Reflection: Faith is a word we often use in the church. Unfortunately, it is a word which has become synonymous with believing certain concepts about God, Jesus and the Spirit. These stories remind us that faith is more than an intellectual belief, it is a willingness to act upon those beliefs. This can be seen in the concept of covenant. Just as with a contract, that to be legitimate requires each side to give or do something, the covenant does so as well. On God's side, God will bless Abraham and Sarah. On Abraham and Sarah's side, the men will be circumcised and Abraham will not confer the blessing on Ishmael, but will act upon the belief that Sarah can become pregnant. Faith then, can be understood as faithfulness; a willingness to act upon belief as best one can.

Questions:

1. Which of the five acts is most meaningful to you, and why?
2. What does it mean to you to be part of God's covenant people?
3. Where have you put your faith into action?