“Everlasting: Covenant Clarity”

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Genesis 17: 1-16 and Romans 4: 13-25

February 28, 2021

Second Sunday in Lent

As we look at our texts today from Romans and Genesis, let’s think through two questions: “What is God promising in the covenant?” And secondly, “What does this covenant mean for each of our lives?”

We are welcoming four new members in this service as Ben, Maggie, Mark, and Kayla will profess their faith and officially join Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church. This act continues a 2000-year tradition of individuals joining a body of faithful believers dedicated to following Christ. These soon-to-be new members spent a year examining scripture, other faith traditions, the Presbyterian Book of Confessions and exploring their own thoughts about their Christian faith.

Last Sunday, they shared their faith statements (or “faithments”) with the Session of PHPC. During small group discussion, one of our confirmands made a terrific point. They said, “I used to wonder if God was good, why did God let my grandmother die? Why did God take her away from me? She was an important person in my life.”

That’s a great question to ask. And asking questions is an important part of an active faith. Why would an all-powerful God allow someone we love to die? And this confirmand’s question got me thinking: “Just what does God promise us, anyway? What is God’s covenant with us really about?”

*I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. (Gen 17: 6-7)*

Did God promise Abraham that nothing bad would ever happen to him? Abraham’s life, the parts revealed to us in the book of Genesis, is not an easy one. He was separated from his first child, Ishmael. He was asked to do the impossible, to sacrifice his second son, Isaac. (Imagine what was going through his head as he trudged up the mountain with his beloved child in tow, believing he must take his own child’s life?) Abraham witnessed the destruction of an entire city and every inhabitant in it. He mourned the death of his wife, Sarah.

By the time of his death at the age of 175, Abraham had witnessed or been part of many, many horrible things. And yet his final words are rooted in the promise, the covenant YHWH, God, made with him: to give Abraham and his progeny the promised land.

*I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*

What did God promise Abraham? Did God promise a life without difficulty? That Abraham would conquer all nations, evade sickness, cheat death, and experience no sadness?

*I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*

God promised Abraham that through faith in God, Abraham would always have solid ground on which he could stand, on which he could build a life. That through faith Abraham would discover a lifegiving source, a never ending, multi-generational promise of belonging. God would not—God will not—abandon God’s people.

Kings come and go, political power changes, lands get conquered and relinquished. But through faith in God, future, hope, and relationship are certain. Future, hope, and relationship are what we really need to survive—and thrive.

In today’s second scripture, Jillian read to us once again about this promise. Thousands of years after Abraham’s death, the Apostle Paul makes clear God’s good will for us in the letter to the Romans. Paul reminds us this covenant from God is everlasting. We cannot lose God’s promise to us. We can only choose how we respond.

Lucky for us, God is saying that age-old relationship phrase, “It’s not you, it’s me.” God is saying “I promise I am not going to stop claiming you, stop loving you.” In other words, God is sticking with us not because of who we are, but because of *WHOM GOD IS*.

So what does this covenant mean for each of our lives? We have received everything, our very lives and all that is in them, from God. Not because we have behaved in a certain way and deserve this blessing. Not because we earned the right over someone else. We have received everything because of God’s unlimited generosity. And we respond with our words and actions not out of fear of losing God, but out of respect and gratitude for the gift of being beloved. For the gifts of future, hope, and relationship. We respond to God’s generosity with our generosity, to God’s faithfulness with our faithfulness. Our response to God is our life of faith.

Old Testament scholar Dr. Kathleen O’Conner writes, “Living rightly in God’s presence is the proper RESPONSE to God’s invitation to covenant, not its origin.” If a confirmand chooses not to profess faith, the covenant remains intact. They are still a recipient of God’s promises.[[1]](#endnote-1)

And living faithfully is not a one time, “Yep, I checked that box” kind of activity. You don’t say “yes” to faith because you’ve run the numbers and it’s a good investment. We can’t say, “I’ve professed my faith…and so now I’m done.”

The joy found in God comes with an ongoing life of faith. Theologian John Dominic Crosson writes, “Faith does not mean intellectual consent to a proposition, but vital commitment to a program…Faith is not just a partial mind-set, but a total lifestyle commitment.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Having faith is pretty easy when times are good. But our confirmands already know a healthy faith will be tested. How will we respond, in word and deed, when circumstances are challenging? When COVID keeps us isolated for a year? When our dear friend dies prematurely? When we are labelled an outsider by our peers? When a deep sadness grabs hold of us and doesn’t want to let go?

In the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner’s character, Ray Kinsella, hears a voice of promise and imagines a land where people can come and experience life at its best. Do you hear echoes of Abraham in this plot?

In the movie, the promised land is a baseball diamond in the middle of a farm in Iowa. Other people, practical and perhaps cynical, don’t share Ray’s faith in this dream, in this promise, and urge him to run the numbers. To give up. But Ray hears the call of covenant and holds steady through each challenge. And while the movie credits roll, we see cars streaming toward the field, with so many headlights illuminated, they seem to match the number of stars in the Iowan sky.

What does God promise?

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Chapter 9 in Genesis was about God’s all-encompassing covenant with Noah and all of creation. In today’s scripture, God makes an intimate, personal commitment with an individual, and Abram falls to the ground, in awe.

Today’s confirmands, Kayla, Mark, Maggie, and Ben are responding to God’s covenant offer of intimate relationship. They are professing their faith. It is a personal, voluntary, all-encompassing, EVERLASTING act. This is the beginning, confirmands, of the rest of your life of faith. It won’t all be roses and sunshine. You’ll experience hardship. But through it all, God will be with you, with God’s promise of future, hope, and relationship. And the believers of PHPC are grateful to draw you in to this body and walk with you.

Amen.

1. Kathleen O’Conner, Genesis 1-25A. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2018, p. 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004, p.386. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)