

## Reflection

In the OT and particularly in Genesis reading<sup>1</sup>, we see consistently God's initiative to re-establish the relationship between God's self and nations. We recognise that the scope of God's redemptive work is indeed global; the promise of reconciliation is planted in the midst of a very specific people, Israel. In this, we see God moving towards the people with divine freedom. The shocking reality, however, is the fact that YHWH willingly binds himself to a people who, like us, persist in turning away from God's invitation of grace. God comes closer to Abram, saying, *"I will make my covenant between me and you"* v2. One of the enduring challenges of this covenant for Israel is the particularity of God dealing with humanity. The one who seeks to restore and reconcile humanity by establishing a covenant with Abram is the one true God.

The pace of the Lent season, as we are in the second week, is perfect for Abram and Sarai. They are well into their nineties, now in the evening of their lives. As old as they are, generally, it is believed that the old are more reflective than the young, more contemplative, and more aware of the mistakes they have made and the wounds they have caused- all of which is appropriate for the Lenten journey. In our Christian journey, we sometimes need a slower pace and a place to listen and pray carefully, to confess our sins, and to turn toward God before we become aware of God.

When God promised Abram and Sarai that he would have a covenant with them, everyone in this story is given a new name. For the first time, God is given the name (Gen. 17:1) *"the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty'"* "God Almighty" (El Shaddai), which might be translated as "God of the Mountain."<sup>2</sup>

Abram and Sarai are also given new names: Abraham and Sarah. The changes are subtle, yet their theological implications are profound. In modern times, names are often nothing more than labels, chosen based on popularity, diction, or nostalgia. In the OT, names reflect the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

<sup>2</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994),458.

character and destiny of the person. In the reading, Abram – Abraham, Sarai – Sarah, and El-Shaddai are linked to the covenant God established with Abraham.

The covenant offers the people **the gift of hope** (*I will make you exceedingly fruitful*), **their source of identity** ( God's people: *And I will make my covenant between you and me*), and **their place in the creation** (*I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you*).<sup>3</sup> At the heart of the story is a promise made by God to Abraham, the promise of *"an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you (v.7)*. This covenant will not end with just Abraham just all generation.

Paul wrote to the Church in Rome,<sup>4</sup> where there was a division between law-observant Christian Jews and law-free Gentile Christians; in response to this, Paul wrote Romans.<sup>5</sup> He begins his arguments based on Abraham and his covenantal relationship with God. Why do you allow the division to separate you, fighting against yourselves about who qualifies to be part of it and who doesn't? Why. If we are the descendants of Abraham, then know that the promise was made earlier before the law. Why are you divided about the requirements of the law, we don't need these laws anymore. The promise comes in Gen 15, while the law (*the requirement as a sign of the covenant "to get circumcised*) comes in Gen 17. In Galatians 3, (<sup>9</sup> *Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come*). Paul explains the law is the mechanism by which humanity comes to recognise what sin really is and the appropriate nature of God's judgement. So, faith in the promise is God's primary expectation of humanity. Paul writes, *"It depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants"* Rom. 4:16.

So for Paul, the promise to Abraham is similar to the promise to us now. Abraham's promise depended on the God of creation bringing forth life from that which was barren v19; the promise for us now depends on trusting the God of creation who brings life from death (24).

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation series* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1982), 154.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 4:13-25

<sup>5</sup> A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 64-65.

God gives the promise of life. In the case of Abraham, God enabled the promise to be realised through the miracle of creation out of childlessness or infertility. In the case of the Christian, God enables the promise to be realised through the miracle of the resurrected life out of the death and suffering of Jesus.

Paul makes much of Gen 15:6. (*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness*). Paul explains that these words “*were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also (Rom 4:23-24)*”

The idea here is that having faith and trusting in the promises of God enable God to make “right” our relationship with God. God wants us to trust in God and his promises. We are to believe in God as a living God, someone who hears us and promises to be with us. God is not speechless; God lives and has this trust in you and me and calls us to trust in his promises. Our trust and belief in God are important, not the requirement of the law. We need not be circumcised before we can have a covenantal relationship with God anymore. For Paul, trusting in God is what God requires. Even if everything looks hopeless, as it did for Abraham, we should still trust in God and know that God will make all things happen. Choose to trust in those promises.

The writer of Hebrews said in 11:6: *Without choosing to trust in God, it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.* In the light of the resurrection of Jesus, Christians are called to have faith in the promise of God. We are called to imitate Abraham's response to the promise he received. We are called to trust in the God who brings life from weakness and tragedy. As Abraham did, so must we.

The second week of Lent is not only a slow week; it is a hard week. The journey to the cross has just begun; the drama of Holy Week is a long way off. During the lent / fasting season/ abstinence season, the church, in its wisdom, calls us to reflect on our sin and brokenness, on all the ways we have fallen short of the high calling of following Jesus. Repentance is a painful process. In our baptism, we have been given a new name: disciples of Jesus."

Jesus calls his disciples, and all saying:

*(Mark 8:34-36) 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*

We have chosen to trust in Jesus to follow Jesus; this is the covenant that we have with God, even as we follow the one named Emmanuel, whose destiny is our destiny: the cross, the grave, the skies. Lenten fasting and abstinence, when understood as practices of faith, have the potential to introduce Christians to a sacramental understanding of everyday life.

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