

Children of Abraham by Faith
Genesis 17:1-11
November 4, 2018

I liked the message on a United Church sign I saw a few years ago. It read "Let's Keep Talking". I don't know what they were talking about but my guess is that they are probably concerned, like all of us, with the challenges churches face in a post-Christian society. The overall picture for mainline churches, regardless of denomination, is slow decline. The worship team I used to work with weekly, like our brothers and sisters in most of our churches, were deeply concerned about our fragility as a congregation. In light of this it is so easy to become discouraged about our future. One of the dangers we find ourselves in as Christian churches in 2018, at least one of the dangers, is for us to slip into apathy: about faith, discipleship, and worship. Whatever way you diagnose our situation within Christendom, we need to be willing to have a serious conversation about our future life together. How do we change this pattern of decline? How do we begin to reach beyond ourselves and grow both spiritually and numerically? What needs to change at West Flamboro to achieve growth, spiritual and numerical?

Let me say out loud the answer is not finances, helpful as they are; they alone are not the solution. I know we pride ourselves on fundraising and how it helps our bottom line in the budget. My position, for what it is worth, is that our modern tithe should be closer to 5% of our net income to all charities and that would be more than enough to support our ministries. Major fundraisers are important for the ways it brings the community together. But we ought never get obsessive about fundraising as a means of saving our ministry budget. The reality is that on average a congregations' giving is usually well less than 2% of net income and that is why we are in deficit year after year. The modern tithe is simply not being met in congregations. So no, finance is not the issue really. It is a symptom of our spiritual lethargy.

We need to put this conversation about patterns of decline and the concern about our future into a bigger context. I think that context is found in our series on God's big story that we have been following over the past months. Yes, even within the ancient people of God,

rebellion, judgment, repentance, forgiveness and restoration and renewal was a regular pattern. God had to renew covenants throughout these generations from Noah to Jeremiah. The sign of the Noah covenant was a bow in the sky signifying that the weapon of war and death was off the table. God took full responsibility so that every time God saw the rainbow in the sky it would remind God of his promise.

Today we read about the **second covenant**, this time with Abraham. The origins of this relationship with Abraham and Sarah go back to the beginning of chapter 12. Called out of Haran to an unknown destination, Abraham obeys. God promises throughout this relationship, that God will give him a land and a son. In our reading today God again comes to Abraham and says:

I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants.

This time Abraham has to keep his part of the covenant. There is something he and all his descendants must do, namely be circumcised. This will be the sign of the covenant.

We should notice that this chapter was woven into the Genesis narrative by the priestly editors in the context of the exile and post exile in Babylon. How we know that this is its source is found in the name of God in this passage: *I am El Shaddai*. This is the first time this name for God is used in Genesis and is the priestly writers name for God. During a time when the priests of Israel don't want the people to be assimilated into the Babylonian world, circumcision is a decisive way to signal their separate identity from Babylon. We notice that this sign of the covenant is restricted to the male population and reminds us that this is clearly a patriarchal society. Even slaves brought under the sign of this covenant are more important than the women. But in spite of these obvious shortcomings is there good news in this covenant with Abraham. What is it?

Think again about the promise. Not simply that God will no longer destroy the world, but now is the covenant to walk with us and bless us. Here is the heart of the promise: *...I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the*

families of the earth shall be blessed.

And as Paul reminds us we are Abraham's children by faith. We are the spiritual heirs of his family. The sign of this covenant for us is baptism Paul tells us in his many writings. In his letter to the Christians in Colossae he writes: *In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision by putting of the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ when you were buried with him in baptism...(Col. 2:11ff)*

Just as Israel's identity and relationship with God was signaled by circumcision and was therefore enfleshed, so to speak, so is our identity and relationship with God **enfleshed** in baptism? You might say rather that our baptism speaks of our being **in-spirited**. How do we embody this sign of the covenant for us, namely baptism? How do we live into this baptism? Does not living into our baptism mean we enflesh it just as Israel's circumcision was a sign in their bodies? We, like Abraham and Sarah are given new names as a result of this covenant. We are now under the sign of the covenant of baptism and given our new name as friends of God in Christ. Through Christian communities like this one God promises to bless the world. This is a huge responsibility that we need to take seriously!

Abraham was now to walk with God in life. God promised to be with him throughout all the dark as well as joyful places in life. I will walk with you, God promises Abraham and all his spiritual children. Walking with God surely means and includes worship as well as service. *Walk with me and be trustworthy* takes us to the heart of this second covenant. It is a reminder of God's call on us to be his people in the world. The training ground for this life of faith is found in community worship, learning, and service. To ignore this drains us of life and support. That's why worship and study groups are so critical for our spiritual growth.

So yes, we need to continue this conversation. Let's keep talking!

Amen