

God Is Not Ashamed

Genesis 17:1-8

March 8, 2009

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him,

“I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.”

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,

“As for me, this is my covenant with you: you shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

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 to your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

In a healthy situation, there comes a point in almost every teenager's life where the connection between parent and child is made absolutely clear.

I speak from my own fading memory of being a teenager, and from the experience of working with teenagers at my last church. There comes a point – in the wake of a near tragedy, or a stupid decision, or a rite of passage – where a parent and teenager have what I call a “two way commitment, one way conversation” about their relationship.

Initiated by the parent, many times these conversations center around the phrase “no matter what.” “No matter what, I am always your mother.” “No matter what, I am always your father.” Of course, the corollary is also true: no matter what, the teenager is always a parent's child.

These are the kinds of conversations that last and the kind of conversations that are referenced along the journey of parent and child, many times in the most vulnerable of moments: “Remember when I told you that I was your father, no matter what? Well, I meant it.”

* * *

Abram was few years removed from being a teenager, and he had already had a few encounters with – and even promises from – God, but until now he did not have a “no matter what” exchange.

This exchange between Abram and God is a classic “two way commitment, one way conversation.” Abram is in the room, but it is only God who speaks.

God has made promises before. So far in Abram's story, what God has promised are things: land, safe passage through Egypt, that Abram will be the father to a multitude of nations. But this promise – this covenant – is different. So different that it is an occasion for transformation. As a result of this exchange, Abram becomes a new person – he receives a new name and a new identity.

“No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham,” God says.

In this passage, God’s covenant extends beyond *things* and into new territory: a relationship.

God said, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful.” That has already been promised.

God said, “Nations will come from you.” That, too, has been promised.

God said, “I will give the land to you.” Again, promised.

“And I will be God to you. And to your offspring after you. Forever.”

That part is new. That part is the reason for transformation. This is Abraham’s “no matter what” moment with God.

“I will be your God.” The corollary is also true: we will be God’s people. It is not a matter for debate – it is a divine statement of grace... “I will be your God.” It is a divine decision that leaves God and the people of God inextricably linked. God changed Abraham’s name because once you are claimed by God your life is different. Once you are claimed by God your life and your purpose are transformed.

* * *

We recognize this because we celebrate this kind of transformation right here in our worship. Every time we gather at this font to baptize another one of God’s children we reference this promise of God to be in relationship with us. The water is poured – and then a new name is conferred: Wells Campbell, child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Child of the covenant. It is not our decision to lay claim to that covenant. What we do here, around this font as the Christian community, is to demonstrate in sign and seal God’s decision to choose us to be God’s people.

About a year after I was ordained a family from Sierra Leon, Africa began attending my church. The children, born in the United States, had not grown up in any faith. The parents, born in Sierra Leon, had been practicing Muslims before arriving in the States. Eventually, the family decided they wanted to join the church, and to do so – they would all four need to be baptized.

As the associate for youth ministry, I was to baptize the children: Yainkin, who was in high school, and her brother Alpha, who was in middle school. Alpha was a delightful kid – he was awkward, both physically and socially, in an endearing kind of way. Yainkin was a typical teenager – she was mortified to be standing in front of 300 people; something else to make her stick out besides the fact that hers was one of only a handful of black families in the congregation.

When it came time for Alpha to be baptized, he was all smiles. As I reached into the font to pour water on his head, he squealed a little because the water was cold: “Alpha Kallon, child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

It turned out that on that very afternoon, Alpha developed appendicitis and had to be taken to the hospital for surgery. It was routine, not really a big deal – but he had to stay overnight. When I went to go visit him the next day all of the nurses on the hall welcomed me as if we had known each other for a hundred years. “You must be the pastor,” they beamed. “Alpha has been telling us about his baptism ever since he arrived yesterday...” Alpha had told every doctor, nurse, tech, orderly, and operator about his new identity. It was an event to remember; it changed his life – it was good news to share...and Alpha Kallon was of the mind to share it.

* * *

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

Years later – as the stories about the great Abraham and Sarah were passed down to subsequent generations – believers remembered these words. “I will be your God.”

Years later – as the Covenant People found themselves without the land that had been promised to them and searching for a way to maintain their identity – these words kept coming back to mind: “I will be your God.”

Years later – into a far-flung corner of the Roman Empire and to a frightened and unwed couple a child was born: “I will be your God.” Not long after that, after a short ministry of teaching and healing and challenging the powers that be – that child was crucified, died, and was buried...and then was raised: “I will be your God.”

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews – one of our Christian commentators on God’s long ago covenant promise with Abraham – assures of us the fact that God’s claim on our lives is unchangeable. No matter what we do, or what situation we find ourselves in, we are to remember, says the writer, that “God is not ashamed to be [our] God.” The writer of Hebrews describes as faith the willingness to allow God’s claim of us inform our living.^{1 2}

* * *

It is a great definition: Faith as the willingness to allow God’s claim of us inform our living. And to transform our living.

Continuing our journey into Lent, I am aware of how popular perception can distort our view of this season in the church to be about what we need to “give up” in order to be better; or how we should contemplate the fact that we are not “good enough” to merit the salvation that Jesus won on the cross.

Friends, that salvation is already won. As heirs of the covenant of grace, we are the recipients of God’s “no matter what” promise.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter (Genesis, John Knox Press, 1982) p 154.

² Cf. Hebrews 11:16

What this Lenten journey can provide is the space to contemplate the magnificent and grace-filled words that spoke to Abraham and to all of his descendents; and how I know there are people who need to hear it!

I think about the many expressions of Christ's church (Presbyterians being one of them) that find themselves conflicted over issues that threaten to divide the membership – wondering which side will be the true church

“I will be your God.”

I think about the Church that is anxious about its future – and is worried about the role of the church in the culture around it.

“I will be your God.”

I think about the Church that decides to take risks in the service to gospel – now knowing exactly where those kinds of faithful decisions will lead.

“I will be your God.”

I think about people – even people in this room – who struggle with feelings of shame, or inadequacy, or crises of faith.

“I will be your God.”

No matter what – I will be your God.

And so the promise comes, and reminds us to whom we belong. It is good news; transformative news.

How will you respond?

+++