

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte
February 24, 2013 (Lent 2)
Rev. Pen Peery

Practicing Discipleship: Marked for Distinction
Genesis 17 (various)

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 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.'

God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.'

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

Today is the second Sunday in this Lenten journey which leads us along the pathway of the cross up to Easter.

This Lent, we are focusing our preaching and teaching on scripture passages that help us more actively practice what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Last week we talked about the practice of remembering our story.

Today our focus is on being marked for distinction. Our passage is from the book of Genesis. 24 years before our reading picks up, God has made a promise to Abram and Sarai that they will have a child. After 24 years, Abram and Sarai are still waiting for God to fulfill that promise.

I am reading from the 17th chapter of Genesis, beginning at the first verse. Listen with me for a word from God...

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This is a story about change.
The kind of change that happens when we encounter God's grace.

As for Abram – his change was pretty obvious.

In the covenant that God made with Abram, for God's part, God promised to cure him of a lifetime of infertility and make him exceedingly fruitful...a father to nations from which kings would come. More, God promised to grant Abram's people a land that they could call their own.

Abram's side of the covenant was that he would mark himself and his male offspring with a permanent sign.

Abram was 99 years old.
At 99 years old, most people are not looking to make any significant changes.¹

Yet in this encounter, the changes don't stop with the physical.

Abram and Sarai are both given new names. But they are not the only ones. As a friend of mine notices, we cannot overlook "that [as a result of this encounter] God also takes on a new name. As he is making the covenant with Abram, God calls himself 'El Shaddai' – translated, God Almighty. It is the first time in the Bible that this name is used for God.

That there are three new names is a sign that all parties to this covenant, Abraham, Sarah, and even God will be marked by the relationship."²

Change is what happens in the wake of grace.
Our lives bear the mark of God's claim.
God, too, bears the mark of this claim.

As Christians, this story of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah is our own.

We no longer keep the covenant in the same way Abraham and his ancestors did. We are made a part of God's covenant through the grace of Jesus Christ – himself, the new covenant.

And the way that we mark our entrance into that covenantal relationship is through baptism.

¹ With thanks to the Rev. Andrew Foster Connors and his paper on this text (The Well, 2012, Montreat, NC).

² *ibid*

And when we are baptized, our life is changed.

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I don't remember my life changing when I was baptized.
Of course, I don't remember my baptism.

Like little Josie Johnson, whom we baptized this morning, I was baptized as a baby. I learned how baptism changed my life as I went to Sunday school as a child and through confirmation classes as a teenager.

My guess is that many of you in this room have a similar experience. Most of the people we baptize in the Presbyterian Church are babies. Most, but not all.

I have done a few baptisms for those who were old enough to remember. One of those baptisms was for twin teenage girls.

Their parents were a mixed marriage – the father was a Presbyterian, the mother a Southern Baptist. The family attended our church, but the caveat was the girls wouldn't be baptized until they were old enough to appreciate the significance of it. And they wouldn't be sprinkled like normal Presbyterians...no, they would be immersed. The parents wanted to make sure their girls understood that when you are baptized into Christ, you are called to live a different kind of life.

When they were 13, the girls decided they were ready. In preparation for the big day, I had a couple of conversations with them over some Baskin Robins.

How were they feeling?

How would they act differently?

What kind of choices do disciples of Jesus make?

What is going to be like when those choices make you stand out a little bit from the rest of your friends?

As Sunday arrived, we made plans for how to include the congregation. Since the font proved to be a little small for an immersion baptism, we decided that after the last hymn we would continue the worship service at an elder's house who had a swimming pool.

I called a Baptist colleague in town to get the skinny on the proper procedure for an immersion baptism (they don't teach you those kinds of things in a Presbyterian seminary). I was told that it was important to anchor the bottom of your robe, so I improvised and sewed some soup cans into the hem of one of my old ones so that I could wade into the water without much embarrassment.

With the congregation gathered around the pool, we spoke about God's promises. We talked about new life in Christ. About how, by our baptism, we are buried in Christ's death and saved by his resurrection.

And then, I dunked each of the girls in the water...all the way down.

Sarah Allen, child of the covenant,

Elizabeth Glenn, child of the covenant³...

I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Standing there, the girls sopping wet with a visible sign of grace, I was reminded in a fresh way of how impossible it is not to be changed by such an event; how different our lives should look as we recognize ourselves as a part of God's covenant people.

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So, how do our lives look different?

As someone said in my Bible study this week, the reality is that it doesn't take long for the water used to baptize us to dry.

When it does, how will people know that we have been marked by Christ's covenant?

Flannery O'Connor, the southern author that I love to quote, once said, "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.

We describe baptism as a sign and a seal of God's covenant of grace. The truth that we recognize with the water that we use is that God's love for us in Jesus Christ is real and permanent and given freely...through no effort of our own. That is God's side of the covenant – and it does not change...no matter what.

Our side of the baptismal covenant is that we are called to be a sign for God; a sign of God's kingdom. That is our promise to God. That rather than reflect the values of this world, we will reflect of the values of the world that is to come.

That our lives will be a light.

That our lives will bear witness to the new reality in Christ.

And because of that we will – at times – seem a little odd – a little out of step with the world around us.

I don't need to tell you that living this way is sometimes difficult.

I don't need to convince you of how easy it is to stumble from the path.

³ Not their real names...

That sometimes our lives aren't appreciably different than those who have not yet recognized God's grace.

But I have seen plenty of times when lives do look different.

Like when a sixth-grader helps to start an interfaith prayer group that meets before the opening bell.

Or when a college graduate turns down a well-paying job to work at a Title 1 school.

Or when a business owner decides that there is a lot more to the bottom line than maximizing profit.

Or when a wife offers her husband forgiveness that he doesn't deserve.

Or when a hard-working father takes a week's vacation to go on a mission trip to Mexico.

These are all ways of living like you are baptized.
Of being a sign of the kingdom that God is bringing into view.

Living like you are baptized is understanding that the most important part of our identity is not found in where we stand on any particular issue – but, rather, how we belong to Christ and – as we are in Christ – to one another.

It is about daring to go where there is hurt, and sadness, and brokenness...to people and places that seem without hope...because the God we represent is a God binds up the brokenhearted; a God who breathes life into dry bones.

Being baptized is about not giving ourselves over to the anxiety that the world is somehow careening over the edge, or to the cynicism that our little lives are too small to make a difference.

Being baptized means we are called to stand out.
To be odd.
To be a sign to the world that God is up to something new.

And, as much as I wish it were not so, sometimes living this way;
Like we are baptized;
making these kinds of choices;
going against the grain...
sometimes it can be painful.

Sometimes the mark of our covenant comes with a cost.

As we will see on the cross, God knows about that, too.

I don't know what the commitment to live like you are baptized will cost you in your life.

I only know that it is worth it⁴.

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⁴ Tip of the hat to the Rev. Andrew Foster Connors for these last two lines (The Well, 2012).