

Covenant: Divine Promises

Genesis 12:1-4a; 15:1-5

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
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In the life of every parent, teacher, babysitter, day care worker, camp counselor, really anybody who has or works with children, there comes a point when the child you care for says one or more of these sentences. “No, I don’t want to!” “You can’t make me!” “I want to do it my way!” or “Leave me alone!”

As an adult, you know it’s coming. As children begin to express themselves, have ideas and preferences of their own, and understand themselves as independent beings, they are going to rebel. But, still it can catch you off guard, and you have to make a lot of choices in a hurry. How will I respond to this with love? Should there be a punishment? If so, what? How do we move forward and hopefully not have this happen again?

You know the drill - whether it is not doing homework or hitting a kid on the playground - you are left to try to find a creative, loving, and immediate response. If you are brand new to this role, you might not get that far. You might just lose your temper or give up out of frustration. Once you’ve been at it a little while, though, you recognize how counterproductive that is and you begin to try different strategies. Perhaps a time out will work or maybe some empathetic listening? Alternatively, you could try some kind of reward system or perhaps bargain your way to better behavior.

If this sounds at all familiar to you, then you have a great advantage in understanding the Bible. The whole biblical narrative is about God loving God’s children and trying to form them into people who are good, kind, compassionate, and just. God created the world with a vision that all living beings would live in harmony with each other and with God. It was a vision of shalom - of unity and peace. The pinnacle of God’s creative process is the creation of humanity to whom God gave free will - in other words, the option to rebel.

Rabbi Shai Held writes, “Beings who do good because they have no other choice don’t seem to interest God very much; beings who choose to serve God and do the right while fully conscious of their capacity (and even propensity) to do evil are divinely significant. God creates a world in which, God hopes, human beings will freely choose to do the right by loving each other-- and God.”

Yet, from the start, humanity demonstrates that choosing between right and wrong, good and evil, compassion and hate is an almost insurmountable challenge, and they quickly descend into a violent sort of chaos. Early on, God gets frustrated and gives up, flooding the earth and all its inhabitants. Or, almost all. Of course, as we mentioned last week, God regrets the flood and makes a covenant promise to never destroy all living things again.

That covenant is the first in a series of divine promises that God makes to God’s people, and the whole rest of the Bible hangs on those covenants. So, during these four weeks of June, we are looking at the four primary covenants. The first three we’ll talk about - covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses - create a framework for the people of Israel to understand their own

story, to create meaning and purpose out of their identity as God's people. The fourth, the covenant made through Jesus, extends that framework in such a way that Christians form an identity of their own.

So, let's pick up the story where we left off last week. After the great flood, humanity returns to its destructive ways. They are consistently tempted by pleasure and by power instead of loving God and neighbor. Once again, God looks for a way to bring them back into harmony with God and each other. Having promised not to destroy the world again, God has to try a new approach. Enter Father Abraham.

By the time we meet him, Abraham is an old, old man. He and his wife, Sarah, are childless, meaning that Abraham's only heir is the son of one of his servants. They also are nomads - living and working on land which belongs to others but not having land of their own. Still, this has been their life, and like all of us, there is comfort for them in what they know, what is familiar.

And then God comes to Abraham and commands him to leave this life - this country where he lives, the home of his father, and go to a place God will show him. That's a heckuva command! God essentially says, "I want you to leave everything, take off wandering, and I'm not going to tell you yet where you're going".

There are these moments in life, aren't there? The times when we suddenly completely change the direction of our lives - sometimes with no clue it's about to happen. Going to college, getting married, an unexpected job opportunity in another state or country, the chance to do something we've only ever dreamed of. I think it was April of my 6th grade year when my family was invited by a pastor and missionary named George Somers to spend a year as missionaries in India. Apparently, George had sent a letter with this invitation back in January, but we never received it. If we were to go, we would need to be in India in July for my sister and I to start boarding school and our father to prepare to teach at Lucknow Christian College. It seemed preposterous to think the pieces would all fall in place that quickly, but as a family, we agreed we would try. Two months later, we landed in Delhi to begin a year of service which ultimately led to my call to ministry.

Sometimes, you just have to trust God and go. And that's what Abraham does. He packs up his wife, his belongings, his nephew, Lot, and his servants, and starts walking. Before he leaves though, God makes Abraham some astounding promises - promises that form a covenant. From Abraham and Sarah, God will create a nation. They will have a child who will father more children and then there will be more children and soon Abraham's descendants will outnumber the stars. God will give them their own land where Abraham and his descendants will flourish. God will make Abraham great - an important figure in the nations' story. And all the families of the world will be blessed through God's blessing of Abraham and his family. So, I guess there was some incentive for leaving home!

These covenantal promises announce the birth of the nation of Israel - God's chosen people. Rather than condemning and destroying the world, God's response to the evil in humanity this time is to create a people who will live in shalom - in the peace and harmony for which God created us. God's covenant with Abraham is a promise to form a people, a nation, whose purpose would be introducing goodness into a troubled world.

And God promises them protection. As Abraham travels and as this new nation is formed, God will be with them to bless those who bless them and curse those who curse them. And so it is with us when we embark on some life-changing journey.

Woven into all God's promises to Abraham is the vision of a new beginning, of new hope, and they reveal so much about God. With these words, God confirms that God is faithful, that God's grace is unconditional, and that God will continuously work toward redeeming the world. Commentator John Holbert speaks of this covenant as the lynchpin of the entire biblical narrative. He writes, "the remainder of the Bible story will be one attempt after the other to reconstitute a broken world. God will be persistent and creative with divine ideas that God hopes will lead at last to shalom".

Now, as we read about God's covenant with Abraham, the context in which we are living today is not lost on me. In our national context, this week we will celebrate Juneteenth, our commemoration of the emancipation of enslaved people in the confederate U.S.

We know from story and song that those who were enslaved, brought here from Africa, treated not as humans but as animals, and forced into hard labor, found great hope in the story of Israel. They learned these biblical stories and saw themselves in the struggles of Israel. They found hope in God's promises to Abraham - promises of land and prosperity and blessing. They found strength in the story of how, years later, God called Moses to free the Israelites from slavery. This is reflected in the great spiritual "Go Down, Moses" which Harriet Tubman used as a code to communicate with enslaved people trying to escape to freedom.

The celebration of Juneteenth not only recognizes the presidential proclamation freeing slaves but is a testimony to the amazing resilience and powerful faith of people who had every reason to give up hope.

In our global context, we are also reading this story in the context of the war between Israel and Hamas - another in a long history of wars between Israel and Palestine. There is plenty of blame to go around and their shared history provides motivation for each to seek the destruction of the other, but the tremendous number of civilians killed in Gaza makes the actions of Israel difficult to comprehend. As Christians, we share God's promise of shalom with our Jewish siblings and struggle to understand how those called to be the people who bring shalom into the world can carry out this battle with such extreme measures.

Yet, this is just a continuation of the story. Humanity is imperfect. We struggle to choose love of God and neighbor over our instincts toward power and retribution. It is no less difficult now than it was thousands of years ago. No less true for us than for Israel and Hamas. But God created us and said we are good. God doesn't give up on us. That is why we cling to God's covenant promises. That is why we are so deeply grateful for God's grace. That is why God continues to seek out those who will live as models of shalom, models of God's kin-dom of love and goodness and justice. May that be who we strive to be. Amen.