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Signs and Seals

Genesis 17:1-27

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Think back to where we left Abram last week. In Chapter 16 we read how Sarai, believing God's promise that Abram would have a son, but also thinking it would be impossible for her to bear that son, decided that Hagar, her maid, should serve as a surrogate. Plenty of heartache ensued, but Abram got his son. Now, as we come to Chapter 17, the next scene in the story, thirteen years have passed. Ishmael is growing up and on the verge of becoming a man. Abram is, no doubt, pleased with his son. He's placed all his hopes on him. He loves him dearly. Abram's now been living in the promised land for twenty-five years. Again, it's been thirteen years since God last spoke to him. From Abram's perspective it looks like God's promises have been fulfilled. But as is often the case when we're satisfied with life, God has even better things in store. Look at verses 1 and 2:

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, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."

This time the Lord comes to Abram as "El Shaddai". You've probably heard that name before. We usually translate it as "God Almighty". It's the name for God most commonly used by the Patriarchs. From what we can tell, "shaddai" as a title for God refers to his power over nature. Franz Delitzsch explains "El Shaddai" as, "[T]he God who so constrains nature that it does His will, and so subdues it that it bows to and subserves grace. [He] is the God who carries out the purposes of grace in the midst of nature, and at last puts a new creation of grace in the place of

nature."¹ Coming to Abram as the God who controls his creation for his own gracious purposes, who controls all things and makes them subservient to his eternal plan of grace, makes perfect sense in light of what God is about to tell him. But first, God reveals more details of his covenant. So far God has really only explained his own side of the covenant: to bless Abram with a multitude of descendants, to give him the land of Canaan, and to make him a blessing to the nations. But as of yet God hasn't spelled out Abram's covenant responsibilities. Now God tells him: "Abram, your duty is to walk before me and to be blameless.

Now, what does it mean to walk before God? I like the way Claus Westermann puts it: "God orders Abraham...to live his life before God in such a way that every single step is made with reference to God and every day experiences him close at hand."² To be blameless, in Old Testament terms, doesn't so much mean to live without sin, but to live in right relationship with God and to live with integrity. This is the core of man's duty in the Old Covenant. To live life—every day and every step—in light of God and in the knowledge that he is with you is what it means to walk and to live by faith. This is the basic principle that God will reiterate later to the Israelites and to their kings, but it starts with Abram. God was working to create a holy people who would be a light to the world.

In response we read in verse 3 that Abram fell on his face. He put himself in a position of humble worship before the God who had promised him so much. We never read that Abram asked, "Why me?" but he must have wondered. What had he done to deserve such favour? And so he bows before his gracious God. In verse 4 God continues:

"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall

your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And 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 of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." (Genesis 17:4-8)

Again, God assures Abram of his promises: he will multiply him exceedingly. First it was as the dust of the earth, then as the stars in the heavens, now he promises to make of him a multitude of nations. But before God goes on he draws Abram further into relationship. Up to this point the covenant has been about the great things God is going to do to manifest his glory to the world. Now, God calls Abram into a partnership. More specifically, he "adopts" Abram into his family, making him like a son, and calls him to share in his work of revelation. This is what's going on in verse 5 as God gives Abram a new name. Consider what that meant. In our culture names don't have a great deal of significance, but in Abram's culture naming was not only an exercise of authority over the thing named, but in naming children, parents were imparting their hopes and dreams to the next generation. In renaming Abram, God brings him into a position of sonship. He brings Abram under his authority as a father and in this new name gives him assurance of his plans for him. "Abram" meant "Exalted Father". It might have been a reference to Terah, his father, or the pagan god his family had worshipped. Whatever the case, it pointed to Abram's pagan past. And God now puts that all firmly in the past and points Abram to the future as he names him Abraham, which means "Father of a Multitude". To get some idea of what this means, consider that we still often refer to the baptism of our children as "christenings". We think of "christen" as to give something a name, but "to christen" originally meant to

¹ *A New Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Sophia Taylor (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1889), Vol. 2, p. 32.

² *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. J.J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 311.

incorporate a child into Christ. A new name and a new identity in the Saviour were tied together. In some countries we still see this happen as new believers in Jesus give up their old pagan names in baptism and are given a new Christian name. With a new name, God gives his son a new identity and calling.

Having “adopted” Abraham, God again promises: Abraham will be exceedingly fruitful and nations and kings will come from him—most importantly *the King*, Jesus Christ, will come to fulfil this promise in the fullness of time. And God reiterates the fact that this covenant is forever. He will never cease to be God to Abraham’s offspring. Abraham’s descendants will not always be faithful sons and daughters of God, but God will always be their faithful Father, even as he disciplines and chastens them. And, brothers and sisters, we can take comfort in knowing that as sons and daughter of Abraham by faith, God will never cease to be our God. This covenant promise belongs to you and to me as much as it belonged to them.

But what about the promise of the land? God says he gives it as an *everlasting* possession, but repeatedly we see God take it away. Remember Abraham’s obligation under the covenant: “Walk with me and be blameless.” God’s ultimate goal was to reveal himself and his glory to the world. He chose to work through Abraham and his descendants, but Abraham and his descendants weren’t and haven’t always been faithful in walking before God. And so we see God revealing his glory at times by blessing his people when they are *faithful* and at other times as he chastens and disciplines his people when they are *faithless*—giving them firm hold of the promised land when their light was bright, but disciplining them and calling them back to himself by taking it away when their light grew dim. God never abandons them, but neither does he give up on his call to holiness. Never does he cease to hold his people accountable.

Now in verses 9 to 14 God gives Abraham something to remember the covenant.

And 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. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

So God establishes the covenant on his own initiative, but to take part in it still requires a human response. God now explains that the human response—the human acceptance of God’s terms—is the act of circumcision. This is the *sacrament* of the Old Covenant. Consider how St. Paul describes it in Romans:

[Abraham] received the *sign* of circumcision as a *seal* of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. (Romans 4:11)

It was the *sign* and the *seal* of God’s promise. That’s exactly what a sacrament is: the outward sign and seal of an inward and spiritual grace.³ But why circumcision? Cutting off a man’s foreskin seems to us like an odd sign and seal of God’s grace.

First, we need to understand that circumcision was a fairly common thing in the ancient Near East. Abram’s people apparently didn’t practise it, but many of the people he knew would have. It was commonly done in one of two ways. First, it was often a rite of passage for boys becoming men. In that sense it was a sign of their strength and virility. In other cases it was done at the time of marriage by a man’s in-laws as a way of receiving him into a new family. Do you see how that would have made circumcision significant? For God’s people circumcision became a sign and seal of adoption into God’s covenant. And the fact that it was done when a baby boy was eight days old pointed to the fact that God’s grace comes to us not as the result of anything we’ve done or merited, not on our own strength, but strictly on God’s initiative.

In Colossians, in one of his descriptions of Baptism, St. Paul gives us some idea of the symbolism of the act of circumcision:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. (Colossians 2:11)

Paul describes the cutting away of the flesh as finding its ultimate fulfilment in Christ’s removing—cutting off—“the body of flesh”, our sinful nature. And because circumcision involved the organ of procreation, it reminded Abraham that God’s covenant was mediated through his offspring. Abraham couldn’t save himself; his salvation depended on another. God was going to save him through his seed, through one of his own descendants not yet born: Jesus Christ.

And consider how strongly verse 14 stresses the importance of circumcision for inclusion in God’s covenant: “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off...he has broken my covenant.” First, this reminds us that *no one* is born into God’s covenant. Entrance to the covenant is through receiving its sign and seal in faith. But

³ See the Catechism of the classic Book of Common Prayer.

this also points to just how important it was for parents to circumcise their children and to include them in the covenant. Consider that when Moses neglected to circumcise his sons, God sought to kill him. Moses was saved when his wife did what he hadn't done and stilled God's wrath.

Does God's requirement that infants be circumcised mean that faith wasn't required? Absolutely not. Abraham's circumcision was an expression of his own faith—of trust in God and his pledge to walk in God's presence—but as he circumcised Ishmael he expressed his faith in God's promise to his children. As he cut his son's foreskin he was pledging to consciously raise his son as a member of the covenant and to teach him what it meant to walk before God and to be blameless. The inward grace of the covenant and the outward sign are two different things, but you can't have one without the other. God established circumcision to ensure a future generation of faithfulness.

The real shocker for Abraham now comes as God speak in verses 15 and 16:

And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name 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 become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

Notice that while God commands circumcision for the males in Abraham's family, the covenant sign doesn't extend to the women. Abraham is effectively circumcised on his wife's behalf. He mediates God's covenant to her, which points us to the fact that it is now Abraham's son, Jesus Christ, who mediates the covenant to his bride, the Church. That said, God also changes Sarai's name to Sarah. Both mean “princess”, so there's no change in meaning, but it does underscore that God is “adopting” her into his family and into his work along with Abraham. She's as much a part of the covenant as he is.

But imagine what went through Abraham's mind when God told him that Sarah was going to be the mother of the child God had promised. For thirteen years he's been living under the assumption that Ishmael was that child. Look at Abraham's response:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” (Genesis 17:17-18)

Abraham falls on his face again. This time the storyteller gives us a glimpse into what was going through his head. First he laughs and then we're let in on his thoughts. As they're expressed in Hebrew, they're a jumble. He was totally shocked by this. We don't know if he laughed because he found it unbelievable or because he was happy or if it was just because he was utterly flabbergasted and didn't have words to express himself. Whatever the case, his first *words* are for Ishmael. He believes what God is saying and because of that he's realised that Ishmael is not the son God promised. No doubt he's suddenly realised that when he and Sarah used Hagar as a surrogate they were outside of God's will. This is all a shock. And so he pleads with God to remember his beloved son. And God graciously responds to him:

God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.” (Genesis 17:19-21)

God assures Abraham that Ishmael will have a place—even a good place—in

the big picture. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, will father the twelve tribes of Israel, but Ishmael, too, will be the father of twelve princes. He may not be the child of promise, but he will still bear the blessing that God promised to Abraham. But first, God stresses: The child of promise is not Hagar's son. Your wife, Sarah, will bear you a son—a year from now—and you will call his name ‘Isaac’.” God shows us here that he has a sense of humour. Isaac means “laughter”. Abraham had laughed and God now says, “Laugh all you want, Abraham, but I will bring about my promise with great joy!” And with that God departs. But notice that Abraham doesn't delay. In faith—that very day—he took his son and all the men of his household and was obedient to God. Look at verses 22-27:

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Now, what does this mean for us? Circumcision was the sign and seal of the Old Covenant. You and I live in God's New Covenant. The sign and seal of God's covenant with us is Baptism. And yet we've already seen that there's a connection. They're different sacraments but there is some continuity between the two. What does Genesis—what do Abraham and circumcision—teach us about Baptism? Look again at Colossians 2:11-12. We've already seen verse 11, but look at what follows:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

St. Paul establishes a direct link between circumcision as the sign and seal of the Old Covenant and Baptism as the sign and seal of the New. How does that work? Well, think back to God's call to Abraham and to Israel in the Old Covenant: "Walk before me and be blameless." That was their duty, their side of the covenant. And yet not a single person from Abraham to Mary was able to be truly blameless, truly righteous. Circumcision was a reminder of God's call to holiness, but no man or woman could actually be holy—at least not to God's standard. But when the Son of God became incarnate in the person of Jesus, he fulfilled the Old Covenant in *every* way. He was circumcised and he lived the holy life that God had called Abraham to live. Then Jesus died on our behalf at the cross. He who knew no sin became sin for us and paid the penalty. Now he calls us to pass through the waters of Baptism in faith. Through the sign and seal—through the sacrament—of the New Covenant he washes away the guilt of our sins and pours into us his own Holy Spirit. He declares us holy on his own merits and then he gives us of his own self that we might actually be holy—that we might really and truly walk before God and be blameless. The old law was written on tablet of stone. It was external. It was impossible to obey. But through the work of Jesus it is now written on the hearts of his people. This is the covenant of which Baptism is the sign and seal. And as the sacrament of circumcision could not be separated from the Old Covenant call to walk with God the sacrament of Baptism cannot be separated from the New Covenant call to walk with God.

All of this underscores the importance of baptism as an integral part of our participation in Jesus Christ. Through

Jesus God offers us a promise of redemption and new life. It is by faith that we accept and trust in God's promise and accept the sign and seal of that promise in Baptism. Faith and act are two different things, but in the economy of God's covenant they cannot be separated. God has established that his covenants are entered by *faithfully* accepting the sign and seal of his promise. To wilfully reject the sign of the promise is to reject the promise itself and to be "cut off", to have broken God's covenant. We cannot claim to be walking in faith while at the same time being disobedient to the very first command God gives to those who choose him.

This also underscores God's desire for our children to be raised as sons and daughters of his covenant. The very first place in which evangelism happens is the family, as parents consciously raise their children in the faith. We see here that Baptism isn't some magical charm or mechanical token that saves our children from hell anymore than circumcision was. No one is born into the covenant. Faith is required. And for that reason God calls covenant parents, quite literally, to raise our children in the faith and as active and full members of his covenant.

Our lesson today gives us another needed corrective. God's dealing with Abraham in giving him the covenant sign teaches us that our own covenant sign, Baptism, is not a symbol of *our* commitment to God. No, it is the sign and seal of *God's* promise to us. And this is why we can take such great comfort in it. It's said that when Martin Luther doubted God, he would take hold of his own forehead and say, "Thou art baptised!" As Abraham saw the sign of God's promise in his own flesh, we see the sign of God's promise in our Baptism and are reminded that while our faith is so often fickle, strong today and weak tomorrow, God's faithfulness to us is strong and everlasting.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for your promises. We give you thanks and praise for the examples you've left us in Scripture that assure of

your faithfulness, but most of all we thank you for the signs and seals that you have given us in the Font and at your Table. We receive them in faith, Father, and we ask that as we receive them you would remind us of your faithfulness and of your promises that we might walk before you and be blameless, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.