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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Lent 2

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, last Sunday, you may remember, we discussed the importance of covenants.

We discussed the importance covenants play in our everyday lives.

We discussed the important role agreements, pacts, promises play in our daily existence.

We discussed how as students and educators, as employees and employers, as parents and children, we have entered into covenants.

We discussed how covenants influence our entire lives.

PAUSE

And we discussed the significance of covenants with respect to our faith lives.

We noted that in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament...we noted that in the Bible the "covenant" is a recurring theme.

And last week we specifically talked about the covenant God made with Noah and his descendants, that God would never flood the earth again.

And we talked about how God put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of that covenant.

Yes, we talked about how God likes to attach a sign to each covenant in the Bible.

PAUSE

Today then, our reading from Genesis, chapter 17, speaks about another biblical covenant.

Here in this Old Testament passage from Genesis God enters into an agreement with Abram and Sarai.

God promises Abram and Sarai that He will bring forth from them a multitude of nations, which would then mean that Abram and Sarai would have to have at least one child, who would then have children, and then those children would have to have children, and so on down the line until a great multitude was formed.

But it must start with at least one child born to Abram and Sarai.

Yes, God promises to multiply exceedingly the number of their ancestors.

God promises Abram and Sarai that from them shall arise countless offspring.

PAUSE

Now this story is a story about identity formation.

This is a story that was for the ancient Jews a story about who they were.

This is a story that provided an explanation for ancient Jews about from where they had come, from whom they derived.

And it explains our ancestry, too, since we find our roots in Jesus, who himself was Jewish, and who understood his roots as stemming from Abram.

This story then gives rise to our great ancestor Father Abram, through the promise God made to Abram.

PAUSE

Now, I have been going along here speaking of Abram and Sarai.

But we know their names are changed to Abraham and Sarah.

People in the Bible often have their names changed when a significant event occurs in their lives.

Man and woman become Adam and Eve. Jacob becomes Israel. Simon becomes Peter.

We do a similar thing. People become spouses and receive the name "husband" and "wife."

People become parents and receive the names "mom" and "dad."

People become educators, and receive the name “teacher” or “professor,” or become medical practitioners and receive the name “doctor” or “nurse,” or become ordained, and receive the name “pastor.”

Yes, our names change or we acquire a new name when a significant event in our life happens.

And thus, we see that Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah when they are told that they will become the parents of a multitude of nations.

Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah, when God establishes a covenant with them.

And, this covenant with Abraham and Sarah is so significant, such that many stories in the Old Testament hearken to this covenant.

Indeed the Old Testament reads like a soap opera at times in relation to this covenant.

Remember for instance Abraham and Sarah were advanced in years when God told them they would be the ancestors of a great multitude.

Abraham was 99 years old; Sarah was 90. And yet God fulfills God’s promise to bring forth a child, who is named Isaac.

And then Abraham is told to sacrifice this child, and we wonder, as hearers of this story, “But what will happen to God’s covenantal promise, if Abraham in fact sacrifices his son?”

But then at the last moment, God spares Abraham’s son Isaac, and we breathe a sigh of relief that God’s covenantal promise may yet be fulfilled.

And then Isaac grows up and he and his wife Rebecca have twins, Esau and Jacob.

And the covenantal promise comes to reside with Jacob, since he, not Esau, is the one blessed by his father Isaac.

Jacob in fact deceives his father, by pretending to be Esau, and he steals his father’s blessing from Esau, which of course stirs up hatred in Esau.

And Jacob then leaves his family and goes to his Uncle Laban, and Jacob marries Laban’s daughters Leah and Rachel, and he has twelve sons by Leah and Rachel and by their maids Bilhah and Zilpah.

And then one day, Jacob sees his brother coming to visit him with an army of men with him, and we think, as did Jacob, “Oh, no, this isn’t going to end well.”

We think, “Esau is coming to destroy Jacob and his family as an act of revenge for Jacob having stolen Esau blessing.”

And we wonder, “What will happen then to God’s covenant? That covenantal promise made to Abraham and Sarah that they would be the ancestors of a multitude...this covenantal promise will die with Jacob. ”

But instead of revenge, Esau runs up to Jacob and hugs and kisses his brother, and Esau displays a great desire for reconciliation.

And we are relieved that God’s covenant may yet be fulfilled.

And then, the story of the covenant continues on.

And we hear about Joseph, whom of all his father’s twelve sons is favored by Jacob, and through whom the covenantal promise now resides. Joseph is the favored one.

But Joseph is a braggart and thinks himself superior to his brothers.

He receives the coat of many colors from his dad, and he brags of the dreams he has in which he sees his brothers bowing down to him.

And furthermore, he tattles on his brothers, giving his father a bad report about them.

And so his brothers conspire to kill Joseph.

And we think again, “Oh no, what will happen to the covenantal promise? How will a great multitude of nations emerge from our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, if Joseph is killed?”

But thankfully Joseph is spared, for his brothers instead decide to sell him into slavery in Egypt.

And then ironically Joseph rises in power to the position of second in command of Egypt, only behind the Pharaoh himself.

And we are relieved to know that God’s covenant may yet be fulfilled.

Yes, the story of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah to bring forth a multitude of nations...yes, God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah reads like a soap opera.

And it must have made for great entertainment for the ancients around the campfire as they recounted the story of their identity.

And as I said, this story is also our story, the story of our identity as people of faith.

It is a story we NEED to know, for it anchors us, it gives us roots, it establishes our foundation otherwise we are sort of just floating around out there.

PAUSE

As people we need a foundational story, which is why I think there are so many people, for instance, who are interested in the genealogy.

This is why people pour over documents like census records, birth and death certificates, ship manifests, and the like.

This is why ancestry.com and why other similar companies are so popular with so many.

This is why so many people have sent away their DNA to find out the ethnicity.

People want to be able to ground themselves in some family history. They want to see how they fit into their family tree.

People want to establish who they are and where they come from. People want to understand their roots. They want to understand their story.

And it is the same with the people of long ago. Only they didn't have DNA tests, and ancestry.com.

They didn't have census records, and ship manifests, and birth certificates, and death certificates.

They didn't have all these documents so as to trace their family line.

No, our ancestors of the faith didn't have any of that.

What they had to trace their family line, what they had to tell them who they were, and where they came from...

What they had was Biblical story, in which God established a covenant with their Father Abraham and their Mother Sarah.

This is their family tree. And it is also our family tree.

It explains who we are, and from where we have come.

These stories of Abraham and Sarah and their family ground us in God's family history.

And that, sisters and brothers, is key here.

You see, we can look at our own family trees. We can see how we personally fit into the network of people who comprise our family history.

We can do all that research with ancestry.com and so on.

But at the end of the day, there is something still missing.

And that missing piece is how we fit into God's story.

"Who we are" and "from where do we come" are questions that are ultimately meaningless without their connection to God.

We might be able to trace our family histories back to our 17th generation on our mother's side, and the 20th generation on our father's side, but what does that mean?

Without some connection to God's story, there is still a piece missing.

And that is why our ancestors of the faith told their family history backwards from Joseph, to Jacob and Rachel, to Isaac and Rebekah, to Abraham and Sarah, and finally to God's self, who established a covenant.

Ultimately, what the Bible is saying is that the reason any of us exists is because God promised a multitude of nations to Abraham and Sarah.

And we are those promised people, and promised peoples, French, English, German, American, Egyptian, Russian, Sudanese, Nepalese, so on and so forth.

The story of the Bible grounds all of us, the whole human family, in God's story and that is something quite amazing.

PAUSE

And we are told that the covenant God makes with God's people is an everlasting covenant.

God says that to Abraham and Sarah that God will be God to Abraham and Sarah and to your offspring after you for all generations.

So, it is everlasting in the sense that God will be God to all future generations of people.

But the covenant is everlasting also in the sense that God's people, Abraham and Sarah, you and me and all people, are part of God's ETERNAL family.

We are grounded, we have a firm foundation, we are solidly anchored into this eternal story.

We are forever part of God's family.

This is message the ancient people heard when they were gathered around a campfire.

This is the message the ancient people heard when they enjoyed this entertaining soap opera.

This is the message they heard—that they were part of God's everlasting covenant. This is who they were. This is from where they had come.

And this was their destiny at time's end—to be part of God's family forever.

And, this is the same message we hear today. Sisters and brothers, we who have gathered around the computer...

This is the message we hear today, about who we are, and from where we have come.

This is our identity story, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.