

Salty Covenants: Abraham and Sarah
March 1, 2015 Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-17
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One of the joys of working here is our administrative assistant, Raina. She is a terrific help, and always willing to jump right into these wacky 'side projects' of expanded bulletin boards, or bulletin take homes I bring to her. These ideas often seem to come to me in my sleep on Thursday nights, which means that Raina is greeted with my half baked ideas on a Friday morning, with just four hours to make them come to life before you all walk in here on Sunday morning. She is usually three steps ahead of me on most projects, looking ahead and taking what she can off my crowded plate. We both love these seasonal sermon series that I sometimes do, because it lets us feel like we have a jump on the bulletin each week. When I use the same Call to Worship or Confessional or a running sermon title, the bulletin begins to create itself before I even begin on Tuesday mornings and she has a good idea where we are heading.

And so it was with a little bit of delight that I stumped her this past week. Maybe I surprised you, as well. When she got my sermon title, she declared 'Ah....you caught me. I was sure the title would just be Abraham. But you have Abraham AND Sarah.' If you were here last week, or read our Lukan Letter on Wednesday, you know we are looking at God's covenants throughout Lent. Last week was the story of Noah and the covenant God made after the flood. Our sermon title was Salty Covenants: Noah. Raina was expecting Salty Covenants: Abraham, as this week's title. And I understand that. We talk a lot in the church about God's covenant with Abraham. We are decedents of the Abrahamic Covenant, we like to say.

So what's with Sarah this week? Has your pastor simply decided she's tired of all the male oriented language? Well, in a word, yes, but in another word, it's actually a big deal. This is the third time in the Book of Genesis that God has declared this covenant with Abraham. The first time Abraham heard this good news, he was 75 years old. The next time God spoke of this promise, Abraham was 86 years old. And in today's story, Abraham is now 99 years old. The promise is two fold; God says "I will make you the father of nations and I will give you land, your own land." So Abraham has been waiting 24 years since first hearing the promises to see them come to life.

That's a long time. Think back 24 years, if you are that old! How much can you remember? How much 'life' has happened to you in the last 24 years? Is there something in YOUR life that you were waiting for 24 years ago, and for which you STILL wait? That was Abraham's situation. And so we can begin to understand why he got a bit confused in the midst of these 24 years and thought maybe HE was supposed to do something about this promise of children. If you recall, Abraham does indeed have a son, when he is around 85 or 86 years old. But this son, Ishmael is born to Abraham and Sarah's maid, Hagar. Both Abraham and Sarah assumed this was the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises God made.

But today we hear a different story. Today we hear that it obviously has not just been about Abraham all these years. If it WAS just about Abraham, then Ishmael would indeed be the first step in fulfillment. But God has different plans, God's own plans. Today we hear that Sarah has been part of this deal all along. We see that God intends the promise to take shape through both Abraham AND Sarah. And to emphasize this, God declares that Abraham will have a son through Sarah. Not just a son, but a son of Sarah's. As well, God changes both their names, showing that this is not just a covenant with and for Abraham, but that this is a covenant with and for Sarah.

In my book, this is huge. Why? Because it highlights how much our patriarchal cultures of century upon century, influence the way we read, understand, and talk about scripture and life. Here is Sarah, plain as day, a key player in this covenant with God. But where is she in the historical significance of this covenant? Have any of you ever heard of the Sarahic Covenant (is that a word?!). Have any of you ever read that we are heirs to the covenant God made with Sarah? My guess is, no. And in leaving Sarah out of this, where she clearly has a claim, a claim God placed upon her, we leave out women of every generation and time. We color the lens of our culture in ways that omit the female creation over and over.

Now, I admit, I have a bit of a personal stake in this conversation, as I come out of a tradition that still relegates women to second class citizens in the church. But sadly, it is not just the Roman or Eastern rite churches that ignore God's blessings and call to women. We have many many sects on our Protestant side of the street, that continue to keep women out of the pulpit and out of positions of authority in the church. And that needs to be important to all of us, even those of us in denominations that have seen the light and welcomed in the Sarah's. It is not enough that some women are allowed to follow God's call, and not all.

But within our own small churches, even those that have women in the pulpit, this continues to be an important topic. As long as we continue to leave Sarah out of this covenant story, as long as we continue to use male gendered language to speak about God, we are giving our children false pictures of God, and of themselves. Sure, we might have a woman in our pulpit, but if all our language talks of God as a man, then God remains a man. The woman in the pulpit merely talks about the man-God.

I have seen first hand the damage this does to both our girls and our boys. Years ago, I taught second grade CCD, Sunday School, if you will. One year we were putting on a little play for the children, and the pastor was to be God in the play. He became ill that day, and asked me to step into the role for him. As I was getting ready, draping myself with a big white bed sheet, the children started to arrive in the classroom. They all asked me what I was doing, and so I told them who I was going to be in the play. The little girls...the girls....said to me "you can't do that, you're a girl!" It broke my heart, but it also was a turning point in my life. I realized immediately the power of language. I realized that all our BS about gendered language just being the only way we had to talk about God was just that; BS. God is not a man, period! I vowed from that day on, as a pledge to girls, and boys!, everywhere, that I would change my language about God.

You may have noticed that I do not use gendered language when I write or talk about God. God has no gender, and so I do not use language that points one way or the other. Some folks get around this issue by alternating female and male pronouns. But I just avoid the whole thing. You may have also noticed that we have been using a Doxology that is non-gendered. The Doxology, which is a big old Greek word for 'praise' is that sung response after we dedicate our offering on Sunday mornings. A few summers ago, Will introduced us to the gender-neutral version we are currently using. It is one small way to remind all of us that God is not a boys name. It is one small way we say to the children of St. Luke, especially the girls, that they have just as much claim to the Divine indwelling as do the boys.

Because foundational to our faith is the belief that we are all, male AND female, created in God's image. But when God is 'he' where are those female images? Where do our girls learn that they carry the divine image within them, that they are valued by God equally? Language is powerful, very powerful to young minds. Young minds are not able to make the symbolic jump from gendered language to inclusivity. And so this story of Abraham AND Sarah becomes all the more important; the language we use here at St. Luke is all the more important.

Language like this is tricky. We think it is innocent. We claim 'everyone knows God is not a man in the sky.' But how true is that? To challenge yourself, I suggest a little exercise. For the next week or so, every time you refer to God, in prayer, in writing, in speaking with others, use only female pronouns and descriptors. Take note of how you react to this language. Take note of how others react. And then ask yourself, is language really so innocent?

Our take home this week asks us to reflect upon this covenant that God made with Sarah and Abraham. Now, I don't know about you, but I take great comfort in parts of this covenant, specifically that God will be my God and my children's God for evermore. That part I like. But me personally, I'm not so fond of the idea of a child at age 90! I said earlier that Abraham was 99 at the time of this story. But Sarah was 90. As Raina pointed out, hopefully that part of the covenant was just specific for Sarah, and that our participation in this promise does not have anything to do with children in old age. So I invite you to also set that piece of the covenant aside, but focus on God's larger promise to us via Sarah and Abraham. Specifically that God promises to be our god forevermore.

This is indeed the covenant God made with Abraham AND Sarah. Abraham will become the father of many nations, Sarah will become the Princess, from whom Kings will sprout. Salty covenants; made with and for ALL God's people, made to reflect the divine love in all people, made with men and with women. Amen.