



## “God’s Promise to Abram and Sarai”

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### Introduction to the Scripture

We continue this morning with God’s promises in Genesis. This time, it is God’s covenant with Abram and Sarai. Though they are now revered as the spiritual great grandparents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in Genesis they appear as an unlikely pair for God to choose for this role. They experienced homelessness, discrimination, infertility, and famine, and responded with betrayal, jealousy, and violence. They don’t appear to be role models of faith. Why would God choose them? When we catch up with Abram and Sarai in today’s reading, God has already promised them a bright future multiple times. But something changes this time. Notice that the lectionary skips 7 verses in the middle of this reading.

### Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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 then continuing with verse 15: 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."

The lectionary ends there but I think we need to hear the next line: Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed.

May these words be to us our light and our life. Thanks be to God.

Impossible! No way, not now, not us!

That is what must have gone through Abram and Sarai's mind.

That is what brought Abram laughing to his knees.

It was ludicrous, preposterous, and even foolish. They had heard it all before. A bright future, a big extended family, a place to live, a vision of generation after generation of prosperity, acceptance and belonging. It all sounded good, but they hadn't seen it yet. And time was running out. Why would God make this covenant with them at age 99?

And yet, God bets the family farm, in fact bets the future of humanity on these two desperate, broken, incomplete, and worn out nonagenarians.

The lectionary skips over some important parts of this covenant by omitting the 7 verses in the middle. The first is in verse 8 where God's promised future includes the promise of land. Abram and Sarai are from the distant Ur. God called them to leave home for a place, "I will show you." Verse 8 says, "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.” Notice that God does not promise them a return home. God promises them a place to belong in a land in which they are strangers, aliens.

While the story may be much older, it is most likely that the story of Abraham and Sarah came to prominence when the Hebrew people were conquered by the Babylonians and living in exile around the 6th Century BCE. For oppressed people, living as homeless strangers in an unwelcoming land, doing whatever they could to scrape by, enduring insults and discrimination, largely vulnerable older men and women, a prosperous future must have seemed impossible. A story like this, of God’s promise coming to the least likely, most vulnerable, displaced people must have kindled their hope. God’s promise ultimately is for belonging.

I imagine what this story might mean to Marcos, an undocumented immigrant in Washington D.C.. Marcos is 65. He came to the United States following the promise of a better future. He does what he can to work construction, landscaping and other jobs. According to a Pew Trust report, it is estimated that 10% of undocumented immigrants in the US are over age 65. Like all undocumented immigrants, they pay taxes, but don’t qualify for programs like medicare, medicaid, social security or anything offered through the Affordable Care Act. The message conveyed is that they don’t belong.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2018/01/03/aging-undocumented-and-uninsured-immigrants-challenge-cities-and-states>) If God’s promise is for anyone, it most

surely is for Marcos. God promises the displaced Abram and Sarai a place to be safe, to belong and build a future.

The rest of the verses skipped over by the lectionary are about circumcision. It is interesting to think about why these verses might have been left out. According to Biblical Scholar, Walter Bruggeman, “While the practice [of circumcision] is older than our text and not confined to Israel, it does have peculiar theological importance for Israel after 587 BC, when the usual institutional supports for the community disappear. In exile, circumcision helped give identity to the ‘insiders’ of faith who had been declared ‘outsiders’ by Babylon” (Walter Bruggemann, [Interpretation:Genesis](#), p.153). Skipping these verses obscures an important part of Jewish identity from readers of the Revised Common Lectionary. The lectionary skips over lots of texts throughout the Bible for many reasons, but this one points to a possible anti-Jewish bias in some of those choices.

More importantly for us, the omission skips over the human part of the covenant. As was pointed out during our Bible study on this last Wednesday, a covenant is an agreement requiring something from both parties. God promises a future to Abram and Sarai and asks something in return. We might debate the relevance of circumcision in today’s world, but it still stands as a marker of religious identity for Jews and many Muslims, going all the way back to this story. The point of its inclusion is that our part of the covenant is to live lives that bear the mark of God’s promise. The covenant binds God to us and us to God. Maybe our part is best summarized in what God asks Abram to do in verse 1, “Walk before me, and be blameless.” Our part of the covenant is to live God’s truth and love.

But there is a shadow side to this covenant. One that we must acknowledge and wrestle with as people of faith who seek to live God's promise in our lives. In his article, "Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians" Robert Allen Warrior, a member of the Osage nation, challenges us to consider the voice of the indigenous Canaanites in relation to God's covenant with Israel. Warrior points out that God promises Abram and Sarai not just deliverance but conquest of the land and its indigenous people. According to Warrior, most scholars and historians agree that, "The Canaanites were not systematically annihilated, nor were they completely driven from the land. In fact, they made up, to a large extent, the people of the new nation of Israel." But, he continues, "The research of Old Testament scholars, however much it provides an answer to the historical question--the contribution of the indigenous people of Canaan to the formation and emergence of Israel as a nation--does not resolve the narrative problem. People who read the narratives read them as they are...History is no longer with us. The narrative remains." Warrior cautions all Christians, both Native American and non-Native, who might look for God's liberating spirit in these texts to center the Canaanites in their theological and spiritual reflection. To de-center the narrative of conquest, its legacy in the church, and its use to justify white chosenness, white authority, and white power. He argues, "They are the last remaining ignored voice in the text, except for perhaps the land itself."

I find myself convicted by these words. Not only do I believe in God's promise of belonging reflected in this text, but I reject the narrative of conquest that suggests one people's liberation must come at the expense of another's. Where

does this tension leave us? Biblical Preaching Prof. Joy Moore at Luther Seminary, suggested in a lectionary podcast that this story reminds us that God's promise must be both much bigger than the narrow story of either the tribe that we are comfortable with or the one we have been put in by those who marginalize us (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/771-second-sunday-in-lent-b-feb-28-2021>). God's promise must liberate us all. The irony is that Abram and Sarai turn out to be pretty good role models for wrestling with God's perspective widening, de-centering, and mind-blowing promise. We know they get it because they laugh, Abram here and Sarai later when she discovers she is pregnant. They suddenly realize that God's promise is only possible if it transforms the desperate, the broken, the incomplete, and the worn out.

A sign of their transformation through this wrestling is that each gets a new name.

Abram, which means exalted father becomes Abraham, which means father to the multitude. Sarai, which means my princess, in a familial way, becomes Sarah, which means princess as a public office or role. They are named and claimed by God and are changed by this deep sense of belonging. This covenant also binds them to God, not just making a nation out of them overnight, but calling them to live faithfully day by day into God's future.

To receive the same radical belonging promised to Abraham and Sarah, we must be willing to break free of the narrow views of our place in it. Embracing God's promises might change everything, our address, our family, our identity, even our

name. But take heart, have courage, and fall on your knees and laugh when it doesn't quite add up. Amen.