

Lent 2 / February 25, 2024

Genesis 17:1-7

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations to be an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

Behold, my covenant is with you and your offspring.

What’s in a name? Abraham versus Abram? The first two letters A and B, pronounced Ab, mean father in Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of the middle east. Abi means my father. It is a word of biological relationship between a father and a child. It is also a word of endearment, suggesting more than mere biological kinship, but rather a close emotional relationship. The Aramaic word “Abba” was used by Jesus when He called out to God in the garden the night of His arrest by the religious authorities. This deep relationship between Father and Son, was the basis upon which Jesus offered His life on the cross for our sins, praying in the moment of death, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit.” Abba Father is a term of deep affection and endearment. It suggests a warm and loving relationship, akin to the contemporary word, ‘Daddy.’

Jesus taught the disciples to address God as Father, saying, “When you pray, say ‘Father in heaven...’” He taught them that God loves them like a good father loves his dear children, saying He gives good things to His children. He told them God loves us with fore-knowledge, saying, “Your Father in heaven knows what you need before you ask Him.” Paul in Romans chapter eight, says that by virtue of our baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection, we have the same deep, endearing relationship with God as our Father, our Abba. He writes, “You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry Abba! Father.” We have this close familial relationship with God, because through Jesus, faith in Him and baptism into His death and resurrection, He has joined us to His covenant people as descendants of Abraham. In Jesus, the Father says to us, as He said to Abraham, “My covenant is with you.”

We are so accustomed to the name Abraham, that we may not realize his original name was Abram. Often when people read the scriptures, they say ‘Abraham’ even when the name is written, ‘Abram.’ More than simply Ab, father, Abram means ‘exalted father.’ It is a name that conveys great honour and respect. Abram was an important person in his family, clan and tribe, even before the Lord spoke and called him to separate from his father’s house and sojourn in the land of Canaan. His wife’s names, Sarai and Sarah, both mean ‘princess,’ which shows she was an important person in her own right. Dearly loved by Abram, to whom she was especially delightful as flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones.

God changed Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah, when He made covenant with him. The change of names reflected the change in relationship, the deepening of their relationship. It confirmed God’s promise to make Him into a great nation and to bring many nations from him. The name Abraham means ‘father of many.’ Abraham is the father of the Arab nations through his son Ishmael, by his wife Hagar. He is the father of the Jewish people through his son Issac, by his wife Sarah. Through Isaac, the child Abraham had with Sarah, God created a special people to bear His name and make His salvation known in the world. The fulness of this salvation came through Jesus, offspring of Abraham and Sarah according to His human nature. Son of God from eternity and our Saviour, through the sacrifice of His cross. God makes covenant with us through Jesus.

Abraham was the father of many, but most importantly, Abraham is the spiritual father of those who believe in God through Christ the Saviour. Biological descent is for this life only. The descent and ancestry that is of eternal value is of the Spirit. It was important that Abraham had many biological descendants who share his DNA. It is most important that Abraham has spiritual descendants who follow in his faith. The spiritual DNA that is most valued by God is faith in His promises, especially the promise of eternal salvation offered for people in Christ Jesus; regardless of their human DNA, given freely and fully to all who believe in His Name.

Abraham is honoured from antiquity as the father of many peoples. Jews and Arabs for all their differences, venerate him as father. Even those who do not share the physical DNA of Abraham, honour him as father. That’s because the most important thing Abram did was believe God. We honour Abraham because of his faith. In the words of the old King James, “Abram believed God and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Because Abraham believed God, the Lord made covenant with him, promised him many descendants and most importantly, promised him a special people through his wife Sarah, and a special person through his children Israel, Jesus our Saviour. God made covenant with Abraham and his descendants Israel, so that through Israel’s great descendant Jesus, He would make covenant with us and all people, in the blood of His cross.

Covenants were solemn agreements between individuals, tribes, and nations. They were similar to modern legal contracts in a certain sense, but they were quite different in terms of the obligations and relationship between the parties. In the ancient world covenants were imposed upon conquered peoples by their overlords. The terms were dictated rather than mutually agreed. Ancient kings demanded costly tribute from their conquered covenant partners, sometimes also demanding worship of their gods and themselves as gods. To break a covenant was a serious matter, even when the terms were mutually agreed. At the time of Abraham, the sealing of a covenant involved the ritual sacrifice of an animal, which was then divided into two parts. Each party would walk between the parts of the sacrificed animal. This signified that if either party violated the covenant the same thing could legally be done to them. Covenants were sealed with the shedding of blood.

In our text The Lord makes covenant with Abram. He changes his name to represent their changed relationship. He requires Abraham to be circumcised and begin this practice in his family. Not included in our text, this encounter between the Lord and Abraham concludes with the Lord saying, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you...Every male among you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” In covenants between kings and conquered people, the stronger party made demands of the subject party, such as a yearly tribute of silver and gold for the assurance of no further violence. An ancient form of protection money.

In making covenant with Abraham and later Israel, God was obviously the greater partner, but when He made covenant with Abraham, he demanded nothing except Abraham to walk with Him in faith and faithfulness. He promised to make Abraham into the father of many nations. He promised to create a special people from Abraham through Sarah, to whom He would give the land of Canaan and over whom He would watch, protect and bless in love. From this special people Israel, came Jesus, through whom God made a new covenant between Himself and all who believe. In this covenant, the Lord promises to be our God, watch over us as His people and bring us into the Promised Land of His presence.

At Mount Sinai, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham’s offspring descended through Jacob, whom he named Israel. The terms of the covenant were the commandments and laws, which the Lord gave through Moses. The Lord would be Israel’s God and Israel would be His people. The Lord would bless Israel with the land He had previously promised to Abraham. Israel would honour the Lord by worshipping Him alone as God. Israel would make Him known among the nations by keeping His commandments, rules and ordinances. When Israel sinned as all frail humans do, the Lord would forgive for the sake of the sacrifices offered in His temple. This covenant sealed in the blood of bulls sacrificed by Moses, was extended to the newborn children of Israel through the circumcision of the male children on the eighth day of their birth. Circumcision was the ritual shedding of blood.

On Mount Calvary outside Jerusalem, God made a new covenant with the spiritual offspring of Abraham. All who like Abraham, believe and follow Him in faith and faithfulness. We are joined to this covenant not through the shedding of our blood in circumcision, but by being joined to the blood of Jesus in baptism. In this the greatest covenant, God gave Himself in Christ Jesus to bear our sins, carry their guilt and remove their offense. In this new covenant, God makes us His children. He gives us a new name, the name ‘Christian,’ those who belong to Christ. He promises to forgive our sins, to lead us in the way of His righteousness. When we fail the test and fall into temptation, He promises to raise us in repentance through His Holy Spirit and to renew a right spirit within us. He promises us an eternal homeland. Not the land of Canaan, but the heavenly Jerusalem. There, with Abraham, Sarah and all who are His children through faith, we will dwell in His presence forever. This is His covenant with us in Christ Jesus.

God bless us with faith to believe, until faith passes into sight in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In His Name.
Amen