

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Fifth Sunday in Lent – March 22, 2015 – Theme for Lent: Covenant
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Genesis 17:1-7, 10-11, 15-16

FOR REFLECTION

In China the parable is told of a man who went out with buckets to remove a mountain that was in the way. He would not live to see it moved, nor would his sons, nor even his son's sons. Still, one day the task would be complete, and they all, generation after generation, would have had a part in it.

- Douglas John Hall, Lighten Our Darkness Westminster (1976) p. 71

As for the future, your task is not to foresee, but to enable it.

- Novelist Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Covenant: The Knife

When I was 21, my best friend whom I had known half of my life, died.

More than that, she was murdered.

And more than that, she was raped and stabbed to death – while walking home from Cal State University Long Beach – at 11:00 at night.

We live in a world where stupid mistakes can kill us.

We live in a world where beauty and creativity and trust and love can be destroyed in an instant by rage and power and the blade of a knife.

I suffered for years from an enormous load of survivor's guilt.

I wondered if I could have done anything to alter the course of our friendship, her life, so that this wouldn't have happened.

I was angry with her for doing such a dumb thing – walking home alone so late at night.

But it's hard to be angry with the dearly departed. So my anger was turned inward and I became depressed. I truly believed that she had been a more intelligent, more creative, more beautiful person than I would ever be.

I should have died, not Cammi. And so I began to bargain with G-d.

As many of you know, bargaining is one of the stages of grief. But, at the time, all I knew was that I was willing to do ANYTHING to make the pain in my heart stop.

Convinced that my friend should have survived and that I should have died, I contemplated putting my car through the center divider of the freeway – some late night – at 80 plus miles per hour. The deal was that, in an instant, I would trade places with Cammi and she would be alive again.

But as I slowed back down to the speed limit, I realized that G-d doesn't make those kinds of bargains. Instead of one dead girl there would be two.

So I made a different bargain, this one at 55 miles per hour with tears streaming down my face. I would go to seminary if G-d would help me figure out why this had happened. And if G-d would help me understand this tragedy, help me to live a meaningful life in spite of it – I would live life with Cammi's spirit alongside of my own. I would do what I could to change the world so that beauty and creativity and trust and love could win out over rage and power and the blade of a knife.

From that night on – for years – I burned my candle at both ends and searched high and low for meaning. And in the intervening years I have come to understand much more than I bargained for.

I understand now that the deal I cut with G-d over half my life ago was not a covenant. It was a bargain initiated in grief to mitigate suffering and to justify my staying alive. G-d was with me in that car nearly 4 decades ago – but was not promising me that life wouldn't hurt – or that beauty and truth would win. Instead, G-d was with me reminding me that G-d's covenant with me was LIFE ITSELF – bestowed 21 years before that – with all the rights and responsibilities, joys and sorrows, promises and pain that LIFE ITSELF had to offer.

I was perfectly free to put my car through the center divider that night. But that was as dumb as walking home late at night in Long Beach. And, besides, I didn't want to take anyone else with me. And, besides, I might survive and how much pain would I be in then? G-d was with me – reasoning with my unreasoning grief – reminding me that G-d's covenant with me stood firm – as long as I did not reject the gift – as long as I chose LIFE that night and every night since.

In the 39 years since that night, I have tried to cut other deals with G-d. I've even played G-d in my own life – trying to change my destiny and the destiny of others – to no avail. G-d does not bargain. G-d covenants with us – and that covenant is on G-d's terms. We can only accept or reject the gift – which is LIFE ITSELF – beauty and ugliness, tragedy and comedy, insanity and perfect sense – LIFE ITSELF.

Looking at our text for today, I must say that Sarah and Abraham are people I recognize as kindred spirits – especially Sarah. These two are bargainers from way back – and with good reason.

Known most of their lives as Sarai and Abram, they have lived most of their lives among family in the home of Abram's father. They are good people, honest people, who walk with G-d.

But Sarai is infertile – barren – which is more than unfortunate. In ancient Hebrew culture one's immortality was through one's children ---- in particular, through one's sons. So the lack of children meant DEATH – much like infertile soil meant starvation.

As the story goes, Abram is 75 and Sarai is 66 when G-d talks with Abram and tells him to leave his father's house – promising to bless him with immortality and greatness in the form of many descendants. G-d has initiated this covenant and made promises – but has not explained yet how this will happen. As modern medicine has shown us, some women CAN get pregnant and successfully give birth in their later years – 50's maybe 60's. But in our story this doesn't happen.

Sarai and Abram leave – go to live in a foreign land – walk with G-d – get older and older. Still, no children appear. Sarai, given hope only to have that hope dissipate once more – Sarai decides to play G-d. She arranges for Abram to impregnate her maidservant. It works. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael – and that is another story. But it is not the story that G-d had in mind when the covenant was cut.

When our text begins, it is 24 years after the initial conversation between Abram and G-d. Abram is 99, Sarai is 90 and G-d visits Abram again to restate the terms of the covenant. G-d will give them many descendants (many of them royalty). AND G-d will give them land AND will make their people a great nation. Abram has heard this before and believes that G-d must be talking about Ishmael, now 13 years old and ready for his bar mitzvah. He falls down before G-d in gratitude and awe.

Then G-d goes on – and gratitude is supplanted by a number of other feelings. One of the things that G-d says is that Sarai is going to be the mother of this multitude of descendants. Abram laughs at the absurdity of this. It can't happen – sorry – not now when she's 90 years old! Me, I can father children any time, in fertile soil. But Sarai will never be a mother!

And Sarai – how is she feeling? We will have to do some real imagining here. Have you ever wanted something so badly that you prayed for it over and over again? Have you ever wanted something so badly that you could taste it and bargained with G-d hoping to get it?

And have you ever gotten to the point in your life when you've resigned yourself to NOT getting it – and now that you're older and less flexible and crankier – you realize that you don't really want that any more anyway?

Well then – can you imagine – wanting children your whole life and being told that its finally going to happen now – now that you are 90 (read that 51) years old? I don't THINK so! That is just one bargain you might wish you had never tried to make with G-d.

Many of you will remember the pain of child birth. Imagine going through that now! Go ahead - laugh if you can! [Exercise to help men to imagine here....]

Our story tells us that this is exactly what G-d has intended for our geriatric couple. Their names are changed in order to mark the promise. Abram – which means “exalted ancestor” is changed to Abraham meaning “ancestor of a multitude.” Sarai – perhaps a nickname – is restored to “Sarah” meaning princess – to signify the royalty that her descendants will enjoy.

This is a SERIOUS covenant that G-d is cutting with these people. And I mean CUTTING. The ancient term “cutting a covenant” is derived from the practice of cutting the skins of sacrificial animals. But it also refers to this covenant that G-d has made with Sarah and Abraham.

The lectionary skipped over a huge chunk of this story – verses 8 to 14. So I added verses 10-11 back in so that we would know what the SIGN of the covenant is. The sign that Abraham and his family are living up to this covenant with G-d is for every male to be circumcised – including Ishmael at the age of 13. (This is the source for the Muslim tradition of circumcising boys at the age of 13 – rather than before their 8th day of life, as Jewish tradition holds.)

And it is made clear by G-d that a man who remains uncircumcised “shall be CUT OFF [excommunicated] from his people; [for] he has broken my covenant.” (v.14) You are either “cut in” or you are “cut out” – not much of a choice. It became tradition among some Semitic people for the father-in-law to circumcise the man who was to marry his daughter. The Hebrew word for “father-in-law” actually means “one who circumcises.” And in some circles, a boy who is to be circumcised is referred to as a “bridegroom.” (NRSV, Harper Collins, Ex.4.25 note)

It is also interesting to note that in warfare, one tradition was to circumcise the conquered men and treat the foreskins as trophies. Perhaps this was a way to show the submission of the “enemy” to the One G-d – as well as to the Hebrew people. But I digress...

As you may have noticed, this is no RAINBOW covenant with creation. This is a specific covenant with our ancestors – cut with the blade of a knife and sealed with blood. And you can bet that Sarah – giving birth at the age of 91 – paid her price for immortality with pain that felt like a knife blade slicing her in half, piercing her heart, tearing her own life out of her body.

Perhaps the men of the family – collectively – might have felt the same amount of pain as Sarah felt singly – giving birth to Isaac – a name which means “laughter” – laughter of disbelief – child of hope and the immortality of his parents – ancestor to the 12 tribes of Israel.

G-d had promised LIFE ITSELF – once again. And G-d had given it – again and again – even to old Sarah and Abraham – when they might have wished it away. G-d promised them the immortality of children – but gave it with a knife to the heart – metaphorically speaking. And it was a knife that would appear again when Abraham is asked – later on – to take Isaac up a mountain to sacrifice him to G-d. But that’s another story – or at least a part of the same story to be told another time.

In myriad ways, G-d has covenanted with each of us. G-d has given us LIFE ITSELF – and IMMORTALITY, if not through our children, through one interpretation of the covenant G-d made with us in Christ – a story we continue to live out by being a church – together and remembering.

The way that the Gospel story is told, there is no mistake in Jesus being referred to as G-d’s own son.

And there is no question that the suffering of Jesus echoes the suffering of all that is given breath, given heart and compassion –

given by G-d’s Grace alone –

the opportunity to EXIST and CREATE and WITNESS the beauty and the ugliness, the tragedy and the comedy, the insanity and perfect sense, the profundity of LIFE ITSELF.

I no longer question whether or not G-d was WITH Jesus when he was murdered by rage and power, bargaining and the blade of a knife – nails in the wrists, a sword to the side. G-d was there, alright, grieving with us, holding Jesus in strong, loving arms – and promising to take him home.

And I no longer question where G-d was when Cammi was murdered.
G-d was right there – grieving, holding her, taking her home.

And as much as it hurts sometimes, and as much blood and as many tears as we shed
in our lifetimes, G-d has given us LIFE ITSELF – through the literal labor of others,
sometimes with the blade of a knife – pressed through the skin to the heart.

And who are we to trade this gift away for ANYTHING?

Who are we to reject such a gift – a gift that in the giving of it – G-d's heart hurts as
much as our hearts hurt collectively?

Who are we – blood relatives of G-d and one another –
to reject a covenant – initiated by the One Who Made Us –
carved into the very stones of Earth –
and given a new name –
with every newborn cry?

Scripture Readings for March 22, 2015 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 10-11, 15-16

¹When 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. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I 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.

¹⁰**This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.**

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I 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.'

Pastoral Prayer

G-d of Sarah and Abraham, G-d of Mary and Jesus,
G-d of Creation and Covenant...

Hear us as we cry - taking in the breath of life –
and as we laugh – giving breath back to You.

Know that we choose life – with all the joy and pain it brings.

In this life – use us for beauty and truth and goodness.

And we ask of you – that when the time comes –

You take us into Your arms
and bring us home. Amen.