

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Second Sunday of Lent: February 25, 2024

Abram and the Covenant

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the second Sunday of Lent. I began our Lenten season exploring Genesis, and continue to do so today. I believe a lot of preachers wonder about how to present these stories in a way that makes sense to our modern times. So, bear with me, as I try this season to open your hearts and minds to the stories of old that try to explain the mysteries of life, and that led us to Jesus.

The book of Genesis was written by authors who identify with the Bronze Age patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons—who are described as the ancestors of the Iron Age Israelites. Almost certainly, these ancient authors did not craft their stories expecting their audience to sympathize with the plight of those “others” who are not part of the lineage of God’s special promise. Yet, if we look closer, we will see that God is inclusive even when the original characters of the story would rather be exclusive.

Within Genesis 17, we see that God explicitly names Sarai—who is crowned with the new name, Sarah—as the mother of nations and kings. God makes it clear that there is no covenant without her. In actuality, this is a shift from the patriarchal society by formally recognizing the feminine. This statement shows that God sees Sarah, God sees the women and their

struggles before him. For Sarah the correlation between the name and the text is not as apparent: Sarai most likely means “my princess” and Sarah may imply the ultimate “princess.” Moving Sarah’s role from singular wife to plural royalty shows she is the beginning of a peoples.

Also, the name changes given by God hold more meaning than just a few letters. For example, the name Abram can be translated as “exalted father,” but the name change to Abraham, is understood as “father of multitudes,” matching God’s promise of many descendants. In the following verses not included today, when Abraham asks about the fate of Ishmael, God makes it clear that this covenant through Sarah and Isaac does not disinherit Ishmael from an abundance of blessings. This is in response to the previous chapter in which Hagar, an enslaved woman who was impregnated and abused by Abram and Sarai then left to die, encounters God in the wilderness. And in her distress, she is saved from death and receives a promise of abundant descendants just like God’s desire for Abram. Again, although these scriptures were written for the Israelite people and focused on their own relationship with God, the Holy Spirit sneaks in and still shows God’s inclusive grace. Today, we still see brother against brother fighting in the Mediterranean.

So now that we have looked at the context and history of this Holy covenant story, we can look at how it may speak to us today. Today, we are in a world where there is so much violence and anger, a world full of sinful behavior. Let’s take a walk down our ancient history to hear God speak.

When God looks with favor on Abel's offering, I imagine his brother Cain's violent anger welling up from a deep longing to feel included. Today we have social media, we have exclusive clubs, we have socio-economic standings that all tell us what we are supposed to act like and think like. When we feel accepted all works well, however when we do not, that ancient rage can come upon us. We are not that far away from the story of Cain and Able.

Last week, when God promised the rainbow as proof that the world would not be destroyed by a flood, and that God would again begin the human and Holy relationship anew, it shows us that God is always willing to give us new chances.

And then after Abram took his concubine Hagar to force God's hand at having a child, then in front of a king in fear Abram abandons Sarai claiming her a sister instead of a wife, here God is, forgiving again, beginning anew, and making a covenant.

The purpose of the Holy Scripture is to show us how over and over again, God tries to work in harmony with humanity. That is why these ancient Spirit-inspired readings are so important. This is why studying their context is so important. Yes, you can cut pieces of the story to fit your own purposes, but when taken as whole in proper context, God's mercy shows up even in the midst of some of these most tragic tales. When Jesus rebukes the disciples in today's Gospel, he is speaking with the authority of knowing these scriptures. He understands his place within the context of allowing

God's people to start anew and become even more inclusive, even to the Gentiles. He also knows that in an ever-changing world where the emotions of violence, prejudice, and overzealous righteousness are present, there will continue to be suffering, and there will continue to be God's mercy.

Doing the right thing, even when nobody is watching. Going the extra mile even when you don't want to. Finding the seed of hope in the darkness and being alright to sit with mystery, is part of being Christian. Knowing the stories of the past and seeing God's mercy and inclusiveness puts into perspective our own need for self-reflection. We all have our crosses to bear, and each decision has consequences.

Just as our ancient people made decisions feeling they were choosing the right thing to do at the time, even when those choices were not what God would choose for them, they were not abandoned by God. Over and over again, God declares his promises and covenant with those who seek him and eventually Jesus will bear the ultimate cross giving us the ultimate covenant of forgiveness, "for we know not what we do."

Again, the Lenten question for this week is; how would my relationship with God change if I knew I was part of this amazing story of God's inclusiveness, even if I am not the main character of the story? How would my life be if I thought God saw me, and knew my name? Would life become a little easier if I understood we all have crosses and trials to bear, but God understands and can bring me strength, hope and grace?

Welcome, to the second week of Lent. Amen