

Everlasting Covenant

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
February 28, 2021
Second Sunday of Lent – Year B
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16



One of the special graces of serving as a pastor is participating in the Sacrament of Baptism. Standing at the font, holding the baby fast against the robe, crooked in my arm. I can see the parents out of the corner of my eye to the left, the presenting elder representing the Session out of the corner of my eye on the right.

The stories of this family are coalescing there at the font in this little one. Maybe they stood not far from the font a few years before to be united in marriage. This could be their first baby, with all the joy and terror that can bring. They are clearly nervous about handing the tiny one over to me. Did I wash my hands? Am I sure that little cough is not a virus? What if she cries? What if he decides to go to the bathroom in an epic way? Maybe it is their second or third child, and this trip to the font is well-worn. They casually put the baby in my arms without hesitation and when he drops his pacifier, she blows it off, whispers, "Five-second rule," and puts it back in his mouth.

The couple may have struggled to conceive and after years of trying and all kinds of medical interventions, here is this gift, cherished all the more for the struggle. Or maybe it is just one parent present, the joy tempered by a sense of pain and loss or absence.

All those stories hang in the air, right over the baby's hand, now wet with water made holy by its use. And that's when we say those words, from the French Reformed Liturgy:

*For you Jesus Christ came into the world:
for you he lived and showed God's love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, "It is accomplished:";
for you he triumphed over death
and rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to rule over all.
All this he did for you,*

*though you do not know it yet.
And so the word of scripture is fulfilled:
We love because God first loved us.*

We love because God first loved us. And it is a straight line between this font, all those stories hanging in the air around it, all that encompasses the story of this congregation and that day long ago when ninety-nine-year-old Abram stood listening and then fell on his face before the One who pronounces an everlasting covenant.

At baptism I often wonder if our vocabulary is too limited. How to convey the magnitude of this love that loves before we can even know it? That seems also to be the case as Abram and Sarai here God speak of “exceedingly numerous” and a “multitude of nations” and “exceedingly fruitful,” as words try to stretch around this event that cannot be contained, as God binds God’s own self to this old man and woman and creates an everlasting covenant, a covenant with power to extend from there all the way to here, a covenant whose story is our story, in which all our stories are bound up in the story of God’s love, a God who first loved us.

Yet eventually, the soaring language comes to focus on the old man and woman. The covenant is from God, to be sure, all at God’s initiative, but it does not leave Abram and Sarai untouched. No longer will the man be called “Abram,” exalted ancestor; from now on he is “Abraham,” ancestor of a multitude. And Sarai will no longer stand on the margins of the story. She, too, is blessed by God and given a new name, Sarah, which means “princess.” Abraham and Sarah, in the evening of their lives, are bearers of newness, given a purpose, showered with words like exceedingly numerous, multitudes, exceedingly fruitful, an everlasting covenant.

We used to ask whenever a baby was baptized, “What is this child’s Christian name?” It was modeled after some Christian communities that give a child a name of a saint at baptism. It was a powerful reminder that, like Abraham and Sarah, we are participating in the newness of God, and our identity is now wrapped up in Christ in baptism.

We are caught up, as it were, into the everlasting covenant, set on the journey of faith. We belong to God. God has given God’s own self to us and made of us a covenant community.

One thing I think the pandemic has helped us see is the ways we are interdependent, the ways we need one another, the ways my actions have an impact beyond myself and my household. We wear a mask not just for our own sake, but for the

sake of our neighbors. We refrain from doing things we normally do, sacrificing something of our freedom for the good of those with whom we share this community. By our actions, we show that we belong to one another.

This congregation has in so many ways reflected the everlasting covenant we share in Christ in the ways you have cared for one another to be sure, but even more so in the ways you have modeled covenant community for our wider community, whether donating blood or making a blanket for those experiencing homelessness or delivering meals or, yes, leading by the example of wearing a mask, making personal sacrifices for the good of the whole, and being generous in so many ways when the temptation is to go inward and care for me and mine. I believe these acts you have done and are doing are an outgrowth of your life in covenant community, your life in God.

A couple of months ago I called one of our members. She is in assisted living and as a result of the pandemic at that time was not even leaving her apartment. She was so glad I called because she said she's been wanting to thank us for all the phone calls she was receiving from folks in our church. She went on and on about the blessing she got every time she talked with someone. Curious, I asked who she had last heard from. A silence on the other end and apologies about a faulty memory, and then she said, "There's been so many; why don't we call them Jesus?"

Indeed, why don't we? All of us bear the name, you know? It echoed long ago as Abraham and Sarah were changed and summoned to newness, robed in flesh in Bethlehem's stable, lived and showed God's love, suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last, "It is accomplished," triumphed over death and rose in newness of life, ascended to rule over all, and all this he did for you, there in your apartment, here at this font, for the sake of this beloved world.

And so the scripture is fulfilled, right here, right now, in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of the chaos and mess we can sometimes make, in the middle of the uncertainty of our days, in the middle of it all the scripture is fulfilled – "We love because God first loved us." In this love is the life of the world. Amen.