

SECOND in Series on COVENANT: "A ROY G BIV LENT" -- OPEN --

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

St Marks UMC, Charleston, WV 2nd Sunday in Lent (March 1,) 2015

^{17:1} 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. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³ Then 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ 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. ¹⁵ God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ 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."

Reuven and his son Isaac had a special relationship. They had ever since Isaac appeared in the world. He was Reuven's first child. Fathers and first sons have a special relationship. From the beginning, Reuven wanted to do his very best to be a good father.

He had not always done so. Sometimes he had gotten too busy with the "things of life," chasing after personal and professional success, running after fulfillment of the duties that others imposed upon him, and looking – always looking -- for the one thing that would make his mark on the world.

In the hindsight of his later middle years, he looked back on his life and realized just how much of his efforts had been dedicated to "*not being forgotten when he was gone*" or, to put it another way: "*to have the conviction that his life had made a difference.*"

Reuven wasn't a bad father, just distracted. Isaac had managed to grow up pretty well. Reuven's police officer friend had once told him, "*If your son grows up, has not been arrested and convicted for a felony, and is not addicted to hard drugs, then pat yourself on the back. You have succeeded.*"

Reuven used to think that was such cynical advice, and he was certain that Isaac would amount to much more than that. As life rolled along, particularly the teenage years, and Reuven heard how many of his friends were having struggles with their children, how

many of them would not be able to claim that mark of success, Reuven became more and more hopeful that he could.

Then the day came – as “those days” so often do – not actually a certain day, not actually a sudden happening. It was more or less a sudden realization of something that had been going on for some time. The day came, when Reuven realized that while his son Isaac would always be his son, now they enjoyed *an altogether different relationship*. Now they walked together as adults: one the father and the other the son, but neither was a child; both were adults. And what had gone on before was all part of what they enjoyed together now.

As Reuven saw the things his son Isaac was doing, heard the things his son Isaac was saying, he realized (as the cult classic “*Cat’s in the Cradle*” song by Harry Chapin says) just how much his son was like him. But Isaac was also his own man, as well.

When Isaac and his wife Jennifer blessed Reuven and his wife Leah with the new title, “Grandparents,” Reuven waxed philosophical. He began to look at life through a longer lens, and not just into the moment.

- In looking back on his life now, he realized that God had been with him all the way, in all of the experiences, even ones in which he thought he was all alone.
- He realized now that in those times when he had been OPEN to God’s direction, he had also experienced GOD’S POWER that made even the mundane tasks of the day, somehow charged with a special quality.
- He realized that when he had been OPEN to God’s Presence in his living, that even the commonplace stuff of life could be done with excellence and with purpose, which gave it meaning far beyond its appearance.

As he looked into the eyes of his granddaughter, Melanie, he was able to see a **future WIDE OPEN**, and very much **beyond his control**, but **also** critically **within the realm of his influence**. His **metaphorical fingerprints** would be all over his granddaughter’s life.

Although originally he had not be pleased about Isaac marrying outside the faith – marrying a Christian, even a Methodist -- he came to realize now – particularly when he looked at how Isaac, his son, and Jennifer, his daughter-in-law, held his granddaughter, that

the love that was present was far more important than the divisions that religion sometimes emphasized.

Reuven was **OPEN** to many more ideas now. Reuven realized that just as his life had been open-ended, so too were the lives of the next generation. These generations not only overlapped; each left its mark on the other – both forward and backward.

And, as he thought upon it all -- even though there had been plenty of struggles before and would undoubtedly be plenty of struggles to follow – he realized that the **OPENness of expectancy**, *versus the closed and hard to satisfy requirements of expectations*, was the way God meant life to be lived.

He did not know what the future held, but he was certain of who held the future. And this was a good thing.

He was finally learning to appreciate how his being OPEN to God, was much more satisfying than his making demands on God, specifying what he wanted (and even thought he needed) in order to know joy.

In this second sermon in our Lenten study on COVENANT, we are looking at the second letter of the **RAINBOW REMEMBERING TOOL: “ROY G BIV.”**

The second letter is “**O**” and the word is **OPEN**.

First Testament patriarch Abram was offered a COVENANT by God.

1. Abram had to be **OPEN** to the notion of God dictating all the terms.
2. Abram had to accept the fact that God’s promises were not spelled out; they were **OPEN ENDED**, and would be unrolled as Abram walked the road with God.
3. Finally, Abram came to understand just how **OPEN** were the possibilities for God. A 99 year old man and a 90 year old woman not merely having a baby, but being the progenitor of nations of people; and being the object sought out by

kings throughout the world. How awesome – (in the words of Saint Paul some 2 millennia later) far beyond what he could ask or even imagine. (Ephesians 2:20)

Covenant with God requires **US**, as well, to be **OPEN**.

Life is going to roll itself out in ways that are far beyond our ability to plan out.

Life is going to be a constant search by every living, thinking human, **for a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose, a sense of having made a difference**, all of which is a **desire to be remembered**.

Set over and against this – as the story of Abram and Sarai, as well as every other human born of woman in the Bible and since the Bible – is the constant question: **Can God be trusted?**

Our desire to live a life with meaning. Our constant wrestling with the question: Can God be trusted?

This **point and counterpoint of life** are as important to our development as they are to the good music they produce in every good symphony.

It is far easier for us to LEARN ABOUT Abraham and Sarah than to actually live their faith.

But, when we learn about their faith journey, especially about how they learned to accept the OPENness required of COVENANT with God, we also learn that they – like everyone else in the Bible and beyond who dance with this point/counter-point – **they fell down and they got up**. And God **WAS, IS, AND EVERMORE WILL ALWAYS BE, OPEN TO RECEIVING THEM BACK INTO GOD'S EMBRACE**. (**Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus**. Romans 8:39)

There's one more little part of today's COVENANT **OPEN**ness story that I want us to consider.

Notice that God changes names. Abram (meaning “exalted ancestor”) was changed to Abraham (which means “ancestor of a multitude.”) And Sarai (which means “princess”) was changed to Sara (which means “princess of many.”)

God and his Son Jesus had a habit of doing that sort of thing: “Simon” to “Peter” and “Saul” to “Paul.”

Native American children are given a name at birth by their parents, which symbolizes the notion of the parents’ vision of whom and how the child will grow up. But then, the child enters adulthood and has a “vision quest” at which time the adult child picks his own name.

Names are important. They are always **OPEN** ended, but point in a certain direction.

Changes of names are also important.

When the Bishop sent me to Saint Marks 12 years ago, I spent the first year trying to understand the identity of this church. I listened hard for a whole year and it seemed to me that “**downtown church that feels like home**” was its identity. I asked and the congregation agreed, and continued to share their stories of how they had given the church that name through their being welcomed.

That name “**downtown church that feels like home**” is well known throughout Charleston. If you go into any major Protestant (and maybe Catholic, too?) church in Charleston and mention “**the downtown church that feels like home**,” I’ll bet that you will find someone in that church very quickly who knows that you are talking about Saint Marks.

But, as the members of this church have been living into that name, I have also discovered recently that this Church has some other names by which it is known in the community. Do you know what they are?

<Pause to hear names given by congregation>

- Let me tell you a couple of experiences of which I know about the NAME of this church. I was coming out of CAMC, Memorial division, on the elevator to the parking lot. A couple that I'd judge to be in their late 70's looked at my clergy ID tag and read, "Monty Brown, Clergy.' Where do you pastor?" I said, "At Saint Marks United Methodist, downtown just across" He cut me off, and said, "Oh, yes, you're at the blanket church. Good job there pastor."
- Eugene Pleasant, our building superintendent, and Terry Davis, our morning custodian, were outside putting up the "Shrove Tuesday banner." A man, whom Eugene thought appeared to be one of the homeless people who lived around here, came up to him, put his hand on Eugene's shoulder, and told him (with tears in his eyes) "This church is the church that cares more for us poor folks than anybody else. Thank you."
- Thursday night, I stopped in the Drug Emporium pharmacy in Kanawha City to pick up a prescription for my wife, Jane, and the pharmacist said, "You know; you're the Blanket Church, and those of us working in the pharmacy have been purchasing some blankets. Can you take them to the church? And one of our women has been crocheting some hats and gloves. Can you take them, too?"

We used to carry the name "downtown church that feels like home" to the people inside the church. But, **because we have been OPEN to God working through us -- even being OPEN to doing some crazy kind of stuff like:**

- an outdoor Homeless Jesus statue that makes some people call 911 and leads others to come and sit next to Him on the bench during the day to pray
- an outdoor drive-by imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday
- Shoe Shining on the streets of Charleston on Maundy Thursday
- Buying pizzas for homeless people to eat on Friday night, while watching a movie with their children, even though these people are unlikely to ever make large contributions as members of the church; and
- providing lay led worship for our homeless neighbors, along with dinner, on another Friday night

- and sending **lay folks** to Edgewood Summit to preach on 40 Sundays a year to between 35 and 50 people each time, while also preaching at 21 other Sundays a year at the 9:00 a.m. worship here at Saint Marks

ALL of these things are happening because people here at this church are **BELIEVING** their **BAPTISMAL NAME**: *Beloved Child of God, precious and Beautiful to Behold*, and they are being **OPEN** to God doing new and exciting things in their lives and through their lives, that make a real difference, in the world, and in their own lives. And the possible are **COMPLETELY OPEN**.

We will continue to struggle between **believing and being open**, while at the same time **wondering if God can be trusted**. And we will **continue to fall down**, and **get up**. But the more we are **OPEN** to God's leading, the more we will discover the **EMPOWERMENT** that accompanies the call.

THAT is the kind of **COVENANT** that Abram and Sarai came to know. It's good for us **to learn about** it. And it's even better when we are **OPEN** to **doing it** in our own lives.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.