

## Sermon Archive 473

Sunday 25 February, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

"Covenant in the Stars"

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**Lesson:** Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-17

**A Reflection:** Stars and giggles

As we know from last week, the first mention of "covenant" in the story of the people of God was after the flood. God, who seemed to have learned something from cancelling out the world's wickedness by cancelling almost all the living things, seemed to have learned something. We didn't get as far as wondering whether that was a learning from guilt, or sorrow - through lingering memories of the faces of those who were no more - or some other kind of wisdom. But we found God having decided that destruction of what's not working was **NOT** the way for the future. For the future was something more creative, more redemptive, more determined, for the sake of the other, never to "let go", that is more determined to say "never again will I flood the earth". We wondered whether this was a sign that God had learned to do more just than command creation, but to make sacred promise instead. That was "covenant", and it was celebrated by the hanging in the sky of a rainbow.

Covenant now is mentioned a **second** time - here in the story of Abraham and Sarah. And interested in how covenant is **evolving** as a vital characteristic of God, and of our faith, we're looking at what's the same, and what's different, in the first and second mentions.

Well this time, as the **sign** of the covenant, rather than rainbows (with all their beautiful colour, vagueness and ephemerality), we have stars. Stars move, of course, but not quickly, and they have a regularity in the sky that rainbows lack. If you trace their movement one year, you'll know how they'll move the next. Stars also are so high up in the sky that the same ones can be seen by people all around the world - well, not all people everywhere, there are Northern skies and Southern skies, but Abraham and Sarah won't know that. For **them**, stars are whole-known-world, global things. Much more so than rainbows. So the covenant sign is kind of bigger, more univers-al (pardon the pun). The covenant feels like it's got a constancy that's maybe even older than the once flooded earth - which is good for a sign that signals a declaration of constancy. God has chosen a sign that is apt.

Maybe it's not perfect (as if any sign is!). Under the stars you can feel very small. The stars can feel cold - especially when you'd prefer to live under a roof. Nothing's perfect (well, in terms of covenant, maybe just not perfect **yet**).

That's the sign. How about the promise itself?

-ooOoo-

The flood covenant was about the future - how there **was** one now, rather than **wasn't**. And the same is true here. Abraham and Sarah live in a culture which tends to worry a lot about bequest and inheritance. If you don't have descendants (especially direct, immediate descendants), then your wealth is kind of unsecured. And around all this unsecured wealth concern grows up a kind of feeling that unless you've reproduced, there's a sense of God's plan not quite having been fulfilled for you. "Go forth and multiply". "Children are a blessing from the Lord". "Who will take care of you when you are old". You've heard that kind of thing - ameliorated in our culture a bit (but not entirely). So it is that Abraham and Sarah, being without a new generation, are probably seen as people who are dealing with many thoughts. As a childless person myself, I want to stand alongside them, and assure them that they're just OK exactly as they are. I believe that. But such is the power of the culture around them saying the contrary, that I'm going to have to stand next to them very close, and for a good long time.

In this second mention of covenant, God speaks into **all of this**. This time, the covenant is made not with the entire world of humans, animals and every creeping thing. It's made to these two people (and possibly, if a next generation comes, then to those who will be born). It's a more **focused** covenant about the future.

God said to Abraham, "And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous. As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations . . . 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.

[Genesis 17: 2, 4, 7]

How is "covenant" evolving? In this story, covenant is not so much a general principle of how the world will work. It is about how **we** will work, and work within a particular set of circumstances that are real to us (when I say "us", I mean one old man and one old woman living in one old tent.). What is real to us, concerning our plight - our anxiety about this "future".

(Now you will say to me that the rainbow plight is real to us - the security of the created order in which we live, and upon which we depend. You will say that of course it's real to us when the globe warms, when the flood comes, when the fires burn. And I will say to you "yes". And we will give thanks that the rainbow covenant has not been replaced, just augmented. As covenant people, we still need to do our part-of-honour to participate as partners in the rainbow promise and its implications for us as "keepers of creation".) But what we have here is the extending of covenant commitment into a future for enculturated people as they read the smaller fears that no one else really understands, but that are sharply real for them. So the way the covenant is read by them, is speaking to them as if they matter - a Word of promise for *my* situation.

And it might be that when we ourselves feel addressed by God, picked out from the crowd, as it were, then covenant love ceases to be a super-general principle, but a special gift that we're more likely to cherish. What do you reckon? Let's see . . .

-ooOoo-

Covenant is a promise between parties. It is made by one to the other, in hope that the other will embrace it, honour it, make it real in response - whatever happens. What makes *this* covenant fragile?

Its fragility lies in that when it was pledged, Abraham's first reaction was to fall on his face and laugh at it. Abraham *first* falls on his face in awe that the living God is speaking to him. But now, when God fills that speaking with an *idea*, he falls on his face a second time, in gales of laughter. The promise is laughable. Therein lies the fragility. - - - Not so much disbelief (which could be OK), but mockery. Not so much daunted spirit beneath massive stars (which could be OK), but dismissal out of hand. Not so much "how can we make this work" (which would be more than OK), but "this will never work".

The question sort of becomes, will this covenant survive? We know that covenant is solemn, sacred. We know it's different from contract. We know that God has called it an "everlasting" thing. But *will* it survive?

**Hymn:** The God of Abraham praise

**Lesson:** Romans 4: 13-25

**Reflection:** Moving beyond the laughter

Will it survive? Well, we are told that Abraham and Sarah had a son - Isaac, the father of a nation. Kings and numerous descendants (as numerous as

the stars in the sky - a slight exaggeration) came to be. You might say the covenant survived to the extent that God fulfilled that promise.

Paul looks back on the story of Abraham and Sarah. One imagines that he would say it worked, because God always honours the promise. It is about the dignity of God's word pledged, about infinite love feeding eternal determination. He **also** though, explores an attitude in Abraham and Sarah that managed to grow and replace the initial derisive laughter. He calls the attitude "faith".

Faith is not, as Louis Carroll's Alice used to say, the capacity to believe six impossible things before breakfast. For Abraham and Sarah, faith was the willingness to hear the promise and go on the journey in which the promise might be made true. He calls it "hoping against hope". He calls it "following the God who gives life to the dead". He calls it "God calling into existence the things that as yet do not exist".

Paul says also that to the extent that anyone shares that attitude shown by Abraham and Sarah, the promise also is shared with them. Nurturing the faith that nurtures the promise. Will the covenant survive? Paul invites us, in our living and hoping, to contribute to the answer. Not to **be** the answer - not to assume that we are God. But to offer who we are as covenant people, by setting forth on the journey anyway. Who are Abraham and Sarah? They are promise-hearing people, who say "yes; let's go on the journey".

On our **Lenten** journey, we're going to find things that will stretch the covenant, maybe tempt us to laugh at promise. As our understanding of covenant is informed by the journey of Jesus through the city out to the cross, we'll ask again "will the covenant survive?" When a tomb is procured, death of the covenant will look convincing. Indeed, Paul suggests that the ultimate stretching of faith will be in what we make of the claim that we believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead". And that may well be the haunting challenge that stay with us on Good Friday.

But perhaps for us, today is the day to remember Abraham and Sarah - and say (as we said in our prayers at the start of this service) **"IN PRAISE, WE SAY YES TO THE JOURNEY."**

"Yes" to the journey to which we are called.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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