

This spring and summer I am officiating at more weddings than ever before within a six-month period. Meeting with these couples and walking with them through the processes that lead up to their wedding is very rewarding. Early in our conversations I present them with a “sample” ceremonies. One ceremony is very traditional and includes many religious references and the familiar words of the oldest Christian liturgies for marriage. The other is a more “modern” version of the marriage ceremony. Then I suggest that the couple may want to choose one or the other or simply work off these outlines to create something unique to them; perhaps they may want to choose elements from both outlines and combine them. But the most important thing to me is that these couples say words that are authentic to them and their relationship. On this very important day on which they seal their covenant of marriage, I don’t want to be asking them to say words that don’t make sense to them. The covenant of marriage should start out with words that are true and express what the covenant means to these two persons.

The covenant we read about in Genesis chapter 17 tells of a binding promise, a covenant between God and Abraham. Just like in a marriage ceremony, there are declarations stated and promises made, and loyalty and fidelity expressed. Perhaps covenants were even more important in a time long ago when lawyers were not available for drawing up contracts. The relationship between God and the Hebrew people throughout the scriptures and later the relationship between Christ and his disciples and between God, Christ, and Church today is based on covenant understandings. So it bears spending some time to think about what covenant means for the God-human, God-creation relationship.

This covenant story was written down in about the sixth century before Christ when Israel was living in exile in Babylon. They were as good as slaves since they could not return to the land of promise; they were cut off from what had given them identity as a nation. In these desperate circumstances of captivity they must have asked themselves if the God they worshiped still remembered them or had they been abandoned? This retelling of the ancient covenant between God and Abraham told by the Priestly writer is emphatic in the way God declares the Almighty to Abram and commands him to walk before him and be blameless, and God’s end of the covenant is also stated; God promises land, descendants, and a future.

Oh, how the Israelites living in exile needed to hear once more that God had promised them a future! And just as God had made these promises to Abram and Sarai, whose very ages presented huge challenges, the exiled Jews could remember that the promise had come true for Abram and Sarai, and the promise of their own freedom and fulfillment (though it looked impossible as they sat by the waters of Babylon) was indeed within the Creator’s power. Abram fell on his face and laughed at the impossibility of what he heard. Sarai in chapter 18, laughs too when she’s going to have a baby. Perhaps the exiles thought they might as well laugh as cry at their state of affairs. But then they hear the story told and they remember; and it gives them hope. Some years later they would be allowed to return to Jerusalem and their homeland.

In the words of the late Paul Harvey, we know “the rest of the story.” We know how Abraham and Sarah’s dysfunctional family struggled and fought and sinned and forgot to walk before God blameless. We too, struggle, and fight, and sin, and wander aimless, at times forgetting the covenant to which we have given ourselves to God’s purposes. God never gave up on this ancient family, and neither does God abandon the covenant that even now drives creation towards the good. God keeps the vows of the Creator’s love, and when we think back and see in our mind’s eye that promise of old, it is as though we are reviewing an album of wedding pictures that remind us of a day when words were spoken, promises exchanged, great expectations felt, and a holy declaration of binding covenant was celebrated. This is why the metaphor of marriage between God and Christ and between Christ and the church has been recognized throughout the history of the faith.

Now it is interesting to note a couple of points. First, just two chapters earlier the same story of promise and covenant is told, but it has a different feel; there's more give and take; less emphatic proclamations by God to Abram. It's the story with the stars in it. Within Genesis, two different voices tell the same story for two different communities, with distinct needs. But in today's text, given the desperation of the community, the preacher needed to give strong voice to the covenant and promise of God so that the people living as aliens in a strange land would take courage and not give up hope. They needed the strength to circle the wagons around their community, to remember who they were, and to live towards the promise of a future they could only see "from a distance." The preacher told them yes they can! And they did!

It is also interesting to note the verses which our lesson for today "skips over". There is a promise of land; this promise is the source of much strife today in the Middle East, perhaps because the boundaries both religious and geographic are not necessarily those of which the divine spoke. These skipped over verses also deal a lot with circumcision which was the symbol of belonging within the Jewish community. In the Christian scriptures the sign and symbol of belonging became baptism. Throughout the faith, some outward symbol and sign declared that the covenant had been agreed upon. And just like the wedding ring is "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace signifying a holy covenant" so too, baptism or the public declaration of faith joining oneself to a particular community of faith is a witness to the importance of the holy covenant of church.

We know that marriages don't always last; sometimes the covenant is broken; sometimes the parties do not walk blameless beside one another. But often they do. And when they endure it is in spite of challenges or difficulties that come, it is because they honor the promises made. All the time couples, find it important to visibly, emphatically, publicly, declare their love for one another and their intention to give themselves from this day forward for richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, as long as life shall last. Like marriages that don't always last, sometimes the church is not found blameless in keeping the covenant; sometimes we do not honor each other the way we should, not to mention honor our covenant before God. As people of faith, every day we are to be living declarations of the covenant made between ourselves and the One who created us and promises to walk beside us.

Perhaps because as a community we have recently experienced the deaths of some dear members, I found myself asking how this covenant of long ago, called an "everlasting covenant" might extend to our particular context today and give us some encouragement. Tom looked up the exact Hebrew word translated "everlasting" and found it to mean literally "for the duration" or "all coming time." The covenant is a promise of "God with us." Because the version of today's story which I told the children talks of stars in the sky and today's text talks of laughter, I remembered a sympathy card I purchased years ago and kept because it spoke to my heart. It included this quote for *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupery: ***In one of the stars I shall be living; In one of them I shall be laughing, And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing when you look at the sky at night.***

When we think about God's covenant extending "for the duration, all coming time" we are ultimately left to trust; but trust is what covenant is all about, and that covenantal trust transcends the confines of flesh and bones; it points us to the eternal. This transcendent quality of covenant and promise brings to mind words pinned by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: ***-I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.***

And so we are always living in a time of covenant that transcends life's elements as we know them through limited lens; and we live in the promise of a future that we can only glimpse from a distance; but in the end it is sufficient.