

The Promises God Kept in Jesus Christ: The Promise of Election
Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16
Mark 8:31-38

“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.”

It is the season of Lent, when we tell ourselves, through the lens of God’s promises, the story that ends on a cross and begins in an empty tomb. You could say the story began in the garden, where God’s relationship to human beings got off to a rocky start. The disobedience of Adam and Eve, the murderous relationship between Cain and Abel, and the wickedness of human society in general, all these things made God sorry he had ever made our species. So God decides to destroy his first draft and begin again. On first reading, Noah and the ark appears to be about our second chance; on second reading, it turns out to be a story about God’s second chance, when God made the first promise to Noah, a promise never again to destroy God’s creatures. Last Sunday we traced that promise all the way to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The God who came near in Jesus Christ is the God whose response to disobedience is not everlasting destruction, but forgiveness in life and the defeat of death in the resurrection. The person God created when God created you will never be destroyed.

Today we have before us the second promise God made, this time to Abraham and Sarah: the promise of election, of choosing Abraham and his offspring to be God’s people. As I understand the plot of God’s second draft, because God has chosen never to be God without us, God needed a people who would live in relation to God alone, obey God’s commandments, and be God’s distinctive people in time and in eternity. Through them, God intended to give the world a glimpse of what it looked like to be the human beings they were created to be, doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with their God. Given God’s promise never again to

destroy, the man God chose to bear the promise of election to the world had to be tested. At issue was trust, which is another word for faith. While there surely were missteps on Abraham's part, Paul will say of this character, a few thousand years later, that "the relationship depended on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace....No distrust made [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." Of God's relationship with Abraham's offspring, you would have to say, on the other hand, that the interaction was fraught with distrust and betrayal as well as obedience and sacrifice. Looking back, there were incredible highs—the leadership of Moses being one of them, as well as the reign of David, if you forget some of the details; and unbearable lows—the break-up of the United Kingdom, the destruction of the temple, and the exile in Babylon, to name a few. But given that God's promise was God's to keep, God never gave up on the relationship, because the love that God is never quits. God kept saying to God's people, one way or another, "I choose you," "I still choose you," "There is nothing you can do that will make me not choose you."

This is a pretty good definition of the much misunderstood doctrine of election or of predestination or of the perseverance of the saints. Once God chooses to be your God, that is pretty much it: you can run, you can hide, you can slam the door in God's face, you can close your eyes and stomp your feet and make up your mind that God does not even exist. You are perfectly free to do all those things; but God's freedom works a bit differently. Because God in freedom promised never again to destroy the creatures God had created--and because God, in freedom, chose not to be God without you, the next chapter is about what more God does to make good on his promise.

According to the way the church came to tell the next chapter of the story, it went back

before the beginning to say that God decided before anything was made to destine the creatures he was going to make in love to be his own. Then in the fullness of time, the promise of God to be God with us and for us was fulfilled in God's Son, God's only Son, God's beloved. In Jesus Christ, we behold the human beings we are destined in love to be: creatures whose destination is God. Yet also in Jesus Christ, God alone bears the consequences of doggedly choosing creatures who continue not to choose him, consequences that necessitate his suffering and rejection and death, so that there is no place or circumstance, not even suffering and rejection and death, where God is not with us.

As we paused last Sunday to consider what a promise is and does, to think about how a promise gives the future as gift rather than obligation, this week we would do well to pause and reflect for a few minutes about having a story, having this story. There are seasons when I am undone by the impossibility of telling you this story in any way that matters at all. What in the world could a story about God choosing some ancient character, whose seed will carry God's promise from generation to generation, from wilderness to land to exile to lament to the one the church says is God's Son, what in the world could such a story matter and mean to you and your children and your children's children?

While it is the church's task and mission to tell the story of the God who brought Israel out of Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead, and to unpack its meaning and import, the assumption that the world and our lives have a story no longer holds true. How did this come to be? Ever since the Enlightenment, according to Robert Jenson, the West has tried to "maintain [a reasonable] faith while declaring disallegiance from the God who was that faith's object." In response, I would add, the church tried to fit its story into the modern world by doubling down on what it claimed for its story, saying that the truth Scripture told--about what it was and meant

to be human in relation to God--was a fact to be proved rather than the story of the promise of a relationship to be lived. At most and as long as modernity lasted, reasonable people attempted "to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller," resulting in pop-up spirituality or the conceit that children can live on the disembodied values gleaned from their parents' casual acquaintance with the church's faith.

Now in this post-modern time, the world has lost the story too and so lost any sense that disparate pieces of our lives add up to much more than a hill of beans. But so what? What does it matter to have a story? To put it bluntly, in response to our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East being herded to their deaths by a murderous fundamentalist sect named ISIS, whose apocalyptic exegesis of the Muslim story appears to be winning the day with young people, Christians in the West have no counter story to tell, no word from the Lord who once promised never again to destroy, no narrative that will make sense of the disparate pieces of news flashing across the internet, no promise of a future given in direct contradiction to death's dominion of the present. It used to be, Jens says, that "the church could say to her hearers, 'You know that story you think you must be living out in the real world? We are here to tell you about its turning point and outcome.' But this is precisely what the postmodern church cannot presume." Instead we can presume that, at best, you are making up the meaning of your life as you go along, with nothing coherent to bring to its tragedies and triumphs other than a quip about dumb luck or sheer chance. I am here to say that you are destined for more!

"Revelation," wrote H. Richard Niebuhr, "is [the] clue that enables one to put together the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful, coherent whole, to see a pattern and purpose in human history, to overcome the incongruities between what life is and what life ought to be." The claim of the Christian faith and of the church throughout the ages is unequivocal: revelation

is mediated through the story Scripture is, in which the reality of our lives and our death cohere with the reality of God's person and promise. We are in it and God is in it with us, and the question is, will we spend our days in lively engagement with its Author, in common pursuit of the chapters yet to be written ahead, in daily gratitude for the companionship afforded us by its ragtag characters, in some degree of humility given the bit part we have been asked to play as undeserving members of God's eternal cast? Or will we spend our one precious life living as though this life of ours were a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing?

In a sense, I think that was the choice Jesus was putting before the crowd and the disciples as he turned toward the suffering and rejection that were necessary if God's promise not to be God without us were to be kept in him. Absent the story of God's redeeming purposes from the beginning until now, there is no sense to be made of what Jesus said. Of course Peter rebuked him because, if we are making up our own stories, the last thing we willingly undergo is great suffering. Jesus tells Peter he is setting his mind on human things, and in the context of what we have been wrestling with this morning, I can only think that this is what we do when we try to live without the story that tells us we have been destined by God in love: rather our reasonable minds become the measure of our chaotic days.

Next Jesus invites the crowds to join the disciples and says something to them that is also incomprehensible apart from the story the church tells. He says that in order to continue with him, they need to deny who they are without him. Otherwise, they can certainly have the life they are leading without God, whatever that turns out to be in the end; but if instead they follow him, they will be given the life they were destined to live, because to follow him is to be with God.

In the end, the daunting thing about the promise of election God has kept in Jesus Christ

is this: in him and in the face of our rejection, God continues to choose not to be God without us. God destined us in love, from the foundation of the world, to belong to him. The story that began in Abraham continues in the life of this community. We are free to throw in with the world that has declared there to be no story and no story teller; we can make it up as we go along; or we can enter this story and see where it takes us, the story that continues at the table, where Jesus says, "I choose you. I still choose you. There is nothing you can do that will keep me from choosing you. Come unto me all ye." Thanks be to God.