**COVENANT COMMUNITY**

**Meta-stories in the Pentateuch**

**LESSON TWO: META-STORIES START HERE!**

Opening prayer

 God of Abraham and Sarah, we live our lives as if they were our own. Yet life is a gift from Your hand and in our baptism we offered our days and nights to You. Recall us to the covenant that binds us together with our Jewish and Christian ancestors. Reclaim us as Your own. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

 A meta-story is a story about one story embedded in another; a story about stories themselves. “Covenant” is perhaps the principle meta-story in the Bible; it embraces many individual stories starting in the Pentateuch and continuing through the prophets, the Gospels, and the life of the Church.

 Read the story of Abraham and Sarah in *Genesis 12:1 – 25:11.*

Focus texts: Genesis 9:8-17, Genesis 17:1-7; Exodus 19:1-9, Jeremiah 31:31-37,

Luke 1:67-80

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 Imagine the dripping world Noah looked out on after the Flood. It was a tragedy of “Biblical proportions.” Noah and his family survived but they could only wonder what to expect next.

Then God said to Noah and his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

*{* *Genesis 9:8-13* *}*

 This is the preface to one of the Bible’s great meta-stories – the story of a ***covenant*** between the God of all Creation and the creatures who are “like God.”

 Imagine the teeming foreign world Abraham and Sarah discovered, to their confusion and consternation. They had uprooted their family to follow the commands of an unfamiliar *YHWH*. They were promised land and posterity if they obeyed. But the promised land was populated with foreign tribes. Abraham and Sarah were old and tired.

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. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham . . . 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 17:1-7 }*

 Fast forward several centuries and the Israelites’ fortunes have hit rock bottom. They labor for slave wages in Egypt. Egypt is far from the “promised land” in both geography and circumstances!

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

*{ Exodus 2:23-25 }*

 *YHWH* “remembers” the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. *YHWH* needs someone to inspire the Hebrews but Moses is a reluctant leader. *YHWH* has to remind him of the ancient covenant.

God also spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God Almighty … I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens*.*

*{ Exodus 6:2-4 }*

 Moses leads the Hebrews out of their bondage in Egypt but their generational journey to the promised land is interrupted by another momentous encounter with *YHWH*.

When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

*{ Exodus 31:18 }*

The word “covenant” comes up 81 times in the Pentateuch: (26 times in *Genesis*, 13 times in *Exodus*, 10 times in *Leviticus*, 5 times in *Numbers*, and 27 times in *Deuteronomy*). “Covenant” appears in 26 books of the Hebrew Scriptures and 5 books of the New Testament. When we piece all the covenant stories together we sense a larger Story – a meta-story – telling us how the incomprehensible Holy Other takes the initiative to find us and to gather us into relationship. This is God revealing Godself.

The story is still being written. We are letters on the pages of God’s script.

If you were married in a wedding ceremony that went “by the book” it opened with words like these:

**Friends, we are gathered together in the sight of God to witness and bless the joining together of (William) and (Grace) in Christian marriage. The covenant of marriage was established by God . . .”**

It offered a prayer that said:

**“. . . We praise you for your presence with us, and especially in this act of solemn covenant.”**

The pastor blessed the marriage by praying:

**“O God, you have so consecrated the covenant of Christian marriage that in it is represented the covenant between Christ and his Church. Send thy blessing upon (William) and (Grace), whom we bless in thy name; that they may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant between them made, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together and live according to thy laws . . .”**

The familiar vows are:



 **…to have and to hold from this day forward,**

 **for better, for worse,**

 **for richer, for poorer,**

 **in sickness and in health,**

 **to love and to cherish,**

 **until we are parted by death.**

 **This is my solemn vow***.*

Somebody (James Thurber?) asked, “If getting married is such a great idea, why didn’t God try it?” God did! God does! That is the heart of this magnificent meta-story of covenant that infuses the Bible from beginning to end. God offers us marriage. God offers us companionship within a covenant relationship. *YHWH* wants people to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish. And not even death will part us!

 Some Sunday come to worship a few minutes early and look at the three baptismal rituals in the *Hymnal*. They are called “The Baptismal Covenant I,” “The Baptismal Covenant II,” and The Baptismal Covenant III.” The three rituals are quite alike, except they are modified for infants, Confirmation, or adult affirmation of faith. All three are identified as a ***Covenant.***

 Each begins:

 **Brothers and sisters in Christ:**

 **Through the Sacrament of Baptism**

 **we are initiated into Christ’s holy church.**

 **We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation**

 **and given new birth through water and the Spirit.**

 **And this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.**

 “We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation!” Baptism is not a cute naming ceremony for babies. It’s not a ticket for passage through some pearly gates. Parents should think twice – or more! – before they offer up their child for baptism into God’s mighty acts of salvation – mighty acts that include Abraham, Sarah, Moses, the prophets, Mary, Titus, Christians who were fed to the lions, and saints who took to the desert to escape the lures of greed and prosperity. God’s “mighty acts of salvation” have included Christians living in the catacombs, Jews suffering attempted genocide, the Selma march, and the federation of Presbyterians and Methodists in Placerville.

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 Jesus calls the cup of wine he lifts at the Last Supper “my blood of the new covenant.” In Communion we extend, not replace, the covenant *YHWH* established with the Hebrews. When we dip our bread in the chalice we claim our role in an activity that reaches back beyond Jesus, all the way to Moses, Sarah, Noah, Bathsheba, Abraham, Mary, Elizabeth, Jeremiah, Ruth . . . .

 For God there is no past nor future. Abraham, Sarah, Moses, you, me, the Israelites, the disciples are addressed at one and the same time, whether through a Pentateuch scroll in a Nazareth synagogue or a Communion service in Federated Church. The same message comes to you, to me, to Moses, to Sarah, to Joseph, to Abraham:

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. *{ Exodus 19:5-6 }*

 Did you realize what you were getting into when you got baptized? Did your parents teach you what they committed you to?

 The meta-story of covenant continues through all the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets remind the Israelites to be faithful to the covenant. The Psalms sing of *YHWH*’s faithfulness in keeping up His end of the bargain. The history scrolls tell of the struggle to know what faithfulness looks like when *YWHW*’s people are exiled to the “strange land” of Iraq where they had no temple and could no longer atone for their sins with blood sacrifices. Before Jesus is born, Mary visits the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah tells Mary:

“Thus [God] has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve [God] without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” *{ Luke 1:72-73 }*

 The Bible contains stories within the meta-story of the marriage binding *YHWH* and Israel in freedom and mutual responsibility. The marriage of Christ and the Church continues the story. The Sacrament of Baptism seals the covenant between Creator and creature. Every baptized child (or adult) is now part of the story. We are sealed in covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaiah, Mary, Jesus, and all the saints in every age.

 We may be known at a distance by the *company* we keep, but the center of who we truly are is shaped by the *covenants* we keep.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

What covenants are you a party to?

(hints: citizenship, marriage, family, baptism, church membership, . . .)

How do you keep those covenants?

How does a covenant differ from a legal arrangement?

Some say God is trying to “seduce” us. What do you think?

How do you understand baptism?