

### **Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16**

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, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 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.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and also give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

### **Romans 4: 13-25**

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.

For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"), in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him 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. Therefore "it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

When my husband Eric was in the army he was stationed in West Germany. Some of you might be too young to remember when Germany was divided into two nations - West Germany and East Germany. East Germany was aligned with the Soviet Union, a result of post World War 2 treaty negotiations. West Germany was aligned with the west. In one of the oddest parts of the agreement, Berlin, which was geographically located 200 miles in East Germany was also divided. West Berlin functioned as an island of democracy within the nation of East Berlin and was controlled by the United States, the UK, and France.

There is perhaps no greater symbol of humanity's ability to separate ourselves from each other than the Berlin Wall. A divided nation. A divided city cut in half by a wall. Eric tells stories of visiting Berlin during the Cold War Era. A trip through East Germany, passing through checkpoints and staying on the train straight to West Berlin. Entering West Berlin, and then, in a special visit, passing through another checkpoint through the Berlin Wall into East Berlin.

Convoys returning from East Berlin had to be checked with mirrors for people hanging onto the bottom of cars to try and defect from East Berlin to West Berlin. Families were divided by the wall. Relationships were severed as contact was cut off between people on one side of the wall and the other.

The craziest part of the Berlin wall and the division of both the city of Berlin and the country of Germany - the division came after the ceasefire of WW2. The Soviet Union and the West were actually allied in the fight against Germany and the axis powers. After the war ended and the ceasefire was called, the divisions did not end. Instead, they became cemented as a wall that stood for 28 years.

Last week we talked about the ceasefire covenant between God and humanity after the flood. God put the bow in the sky, pointed towards the heavens rather than at humanity, and called a truce. God will never again destroy all of the earth. No matter humanity's sin, God will not strike us in the way of war.

Ceasefires are not enough for the full realization of peace, at least in the Biblical sense. In Hebrew, the word for peace, Shalom, is about fullness of relationship and life. When we look back to the garden of Eden, and God's grace-designed world humanity is not supposed to know the difference between good and evil. The relationship between God and humanity is not to be based on adherence to law, but mutual enjoyment and flourishing.

Ceasefires simply stop the violence. They allow for relationship but they do not ensure it. Ceasefires end active attacks but they do not move towards mutual enjoyment and flourishing.

The Berlin Wall is a symbol of that. Two parties to the war, who were even on the same side, after the ceasefire, divided and turned away from one another rather than toward one another.

Humanity did the same after the ceasefire with God. We continued our practice of sin. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for sin, is chet or chata, which literally means to miss the mark. It is an archery term. God sets the bow in the sky, pointing towards the heavens indicating that God will never again miss the mark by aiming for the wrong target - God's own creation humanity.

Human beings, though, continue time and again to aim and fire, missing the mark of living into the image of God gifted to us at our creation and God's intentions for us. Rather than choosing mutual flourishing, we instead know the difference between good and evil and continue choosing evil. Sometimes ceasefires seem like the best we can hope for. On this, the day after we launched an assault on a foreign nation, striking an elementary school and killing school children, we might long for a ceasefire.

God dreams of more though and does not withdraw after the flood, leaving us to our own destructive devices. Instead, God comes to us through Abram and invites us into a joint endeavor and a mutual covenant.

So much of the Abram story focuses on Abram, who will become Abraham, and his faith. He trusts God when God calls him into an unknown land, when God calls him to climb the mountain with his son Isaac, when God promises that he will have a child in his old age.

As all covenants between God and humanity, though, this really begins with God. God has laid down God's weapons and called a cease-fire, and then takes the next step towards relationship and invites Abram, as a representative for humanity, into relationship. This is a move towards the vision God had in the garden, where God and humanity were in a relationship of Shalom with one another.

God pre-emptively, before humans have proven themselves capable of maintaining a relationship with God, reaches out to us and offers a covenant. The covenant comes in the form of God restoring life through Abram in his old age.

There is a sense of a second creation happening here. God is establishing, through Abram and Sarai, renamed Sarah, a people. Their flesh is redeemed in the promise of the birth of a child even in their old age. The vision of God in relationship with humanity, first dreamed in the garden, is coming into fruition in this covenant.

Even though the people, starting with Adam and Eve and then down through the generations, have turned away from God and God's vision for creation, God extends the offer, once again, for relationship.

In the garden, before the eating of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, the relationship would have been natural, not bound by covenant or law. It was intended to be based on mutuality, faithfulness and shared purpose. The intent was for relationship to flourish with the people given everything save one tree in the garden. God gave them but one instruction and intended that God and the people would thrive together.

The first sin changed that relationship and now God marks the relationship with covenant, laying out the expectations from both parties. Gone are the days when the gifting of all creation defines the relationship between God and people. Now God moves to covenant terms where the terms are delineated for both parties.

God will gift Abram and Sarai with a nation, a people as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram will walk blameless with God, go where God leads, and mark these people, this nation, as God's own through circumcision.

Even as God presents this invitation to Abram, humanity has not yet proved itself trustworthy. God has laid down God's weapons and called a ceasefire. Now God, with almost child-like trust invites humans to join with God to make something together. This invitation comes not because the humans have proven themselves, but because God's grace invites us into salvation time and again.

God could allow the ceasefire to be the last word. To leave the relationship non-violent, at least from God towards humanity, but strained. Even this would be an act of grace. Rather than punishing us for sin, God could recede into the distant heavens and leave us to our own destructive devices.

Instead, God comes to us yet again with an invitation instructing us in the healing of strained relationships, on micro and macro levels. It might make this big, audacious expectation of trust achievable to know that what we are being invited to do, as trusters of God, is co-create; to be makers of something beautiful and big and audacious and purposeful.

When relationships are broken, a ceasefire paves the way for restoration. It is but a beginning, though, not the fullness of what can be. Shalom is God's intention for creation. The next step towards shalom after a ceasefire is trust. To establish trust, we must begin to understand each other, work together, take steps towards mutual accountability. That is exactly what God is making possible with Abraham and Sarah.

Let's create together. Let's form a people. Let's bind ourselves to one another for the rest of time in this shared creation. Then, even when the relationship is compromised again, when sin enters the picture, when humans miss the mark, everyone has a reason to come back to the table. Trust has been established. We hold something in common and we all are vested in the repair of the relationship.

When the Berlin Wall came down, the two halves of the city were re-united. Many broken relationships were mended when families and friends physically divided by the wall were reunited. But there was a larger wound, symbolized by the concrete wall, that remained. Human sin was on display in that wall. Our ability to divide, to conquer, to claim what is not ours was all symbolized by that monolith that cut across geography and humanity.

What do you do with that kind of symbol? How do you reclaim beauty and shalom in the face of hate and destruction? God has given us the answer in this story. You create. Artists from around the world painted a section of the wall in East Berlin and this section still stands as the East side gallery.

Over 100 paintings transformed the symbol of oppression into a sign of hope and peace. The international nature of the art symbolized the new openness of Berlin and the invitation to express freely, something prohibited under Soviet occupation. Perhaps more than anything, the art on the wall symbolized that more than a ceasefire is needed for true peace to flourish.

Before the law, before Jesus, God comes to us and re-establishes relationship, inviting us to co-create with God, to bind ourselves to God for all of eternity in a shared people. God's continues to reach out towards us, redeeming us and inviting us to draw near to God once again.

This is the gift of God's grace offered in this covenant with Abraham and Sarah. The reestablishing of relationship and the promise of future partnership through shared creativity. Yet again, God is interceding for the well-being of humanity, redeeming the sins of the past and reminding us that always, Salvation is Here! Will we, like Abraham, trust and follow?