

God's covenants of love are like the pearls on a necklace of redemption. Each pearl is itself beautiful, but threaded together, the necklace adorns the entire body.

God's covenants –taken together and confirmed by Jesus – make the whole human race beautiful.

That's what the Bible's story is all about.

Last week, we heard God's covenant with Noah that the whole earth would never again be flooded all at once.

That covenant demonstrates God's love for creation and the human race. Nothing in the entire cosmos will be left out of God's redemptive work.

This week, we hear the Lord's covenant with Abram regarding descendants.

This is the Bible's second account of this covenant and it shows us the persistence of God's will even when we mess things up.

Phew! *That's* good news!

The first time Abram heard God's promise of descendants, he and Sarai got busy in the bedroom.

They were ambitious – eager to see the fruit of their labor.

(in their desire, they forgot that this covenant would be *God's* work, not their own.)

But as hard as they tried, no children came.

And because she felt entitled to a child, Sarai got angry.

She told Abram to sleep with her slave girl and get a son that way.

And so Ishmael was born – not as the fruit of God’s covenant, but as the result of Sarai’s willful ambition.

As our story today begins, Ishmael is 13 years old
– the age of adulthood in the ancient world.

And Abram is wondering if God will accept Ishmael as his heir – after all, he is a descendant....

But God had other plans.

...

Have you ever become impatient with God?

Have you ever gone ahead and done something and then discovered too late that God had an even better plan?

As a child, I remember an occasion when my mother served ice cream, cautioning us to wait to eat it.

I didn’t want to wait. So, I ate my ice cream.

And then, when my mother had put the container in the freezer, she came back to the table with all my favorite sundae toppings.

I missed out on the best plan because I willfully disobeyed my mother and did what *I* wanted.

It is hard to “wait upon the Lord” as the Psalmist says.

The devil takes advantage of our impatience and lures us into all kinds of lesser things – sometimes even good things

– but not the *best* things God wants for us.

What are we to do when we've settled for less?

Let's turn back to Abram and see what we can learn.

First, take notice that although Abram and Sarai have settled for less, have been seduced into acting on their own,

and have left Ishmael's mother Hagar used and abused,

God is merciful to them.

Walk before me and be blameless, the Lord says to Abram.

These are words of absolution. Words of forgiveness.

I might paraphrase it as God saying,

- “Abram, I know you and Sarai have made a real mess of things.
- You have not trusted me to keep my word.
- You have acted upon your own will, against my will.
- Yes, Abram, you're a real mess.

So come here to me and I will put things right with you.

I will create in you a clean heart and give you another chance to trust me.”

No wonder Abram fell on his face before the Lord!

God's mercy and love rendered him utterly defenseless.

His own will was broken and the burden of Ishmael was no longer his to bear.

The Lord placed Abram in the vulnerable and submissive posture that is necessary for him to hear God's word,

have it sink into his heart so that

by the Holy Spirit, he might trust it.

Then the Lord repeated his covenant – I will make you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. Your descendants will be too numerous to count. *“I am establishing my covenant between me and you, along with your descendants after you, generation after generation, as an everlasting covenant....⁸ I will give you and your descendants after you the land in which you are now immigrants...as a permanent possession; and I will be their God.”*

Your name will no longer be Abram, exalted father, but Abraham, Father of many.

So far, so good. **But Abram was still having trust issues.**

He was thinking to himself that a few more young concubines in the harem would be very fruitful with his seed,

but once more, Abraham's will was getting in God's way.

The Lord said – not the harem or the slave girls will give you the descendants I promise –

but Sarai, your wife, will bear you the son of this covenant.

And she will no longer be called Sarai, mockery, but Sarah, princess. From her will come kings and nations.

And Abraham, his eyes on the ground before the Lord, could not stifle his laugh.

How can that old woman give birth at age 90?!

And how am I supposed to rise to the occasion at my age?!

...

Trust in the Lord is hard.

We are such reasonable people. We have facts and medical studies, and experience, and probabilities.

But God makes things happen that defy the reasonable, the factual, the data and probabilities.

God loves the losers, the screw-ups, the repeat sinners

– cleans them up,

and even chooses them to carry out his divine purpose.

God makse a couple in their nineties virile.

And God raises the dead.

So when God makes a covenant, it is trustworthy – because God is faithful.

Ishmael, the son of willfulness, would not be the son of the covenant.

Sarah's own son by Abraham would be the means by which God would prove his faithfulness.

And that son's name would be Laughter – Isaac – because Abraham and Sarah laughed at God's promise.

Isaac would be a reminder of their lack of trust and God's steadfast love for them in spite of it.

Later, Abraham would have yet another chance to trust the Lord, by offering Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord.

And by then, the Holy Spirit had worked in his heart to trust without hesitation or reserve.

Do you see how persistent God is in demonstrating faithfulness to his covenant promises?

The Lord is no less persistent with us, his beloved people.

When we consider Jesus as the fulfillment of all the promises God makes in love,

we can learn to be patient and wait for the Lord to act in our lives

- in God's time,
- according to God's will,
- and for the sake of our salvation.

Today, the Lord says to us, as to Abram, those words of grace – *“Walk before me and be blameless.”*

Come into my presence and receive my forgiveness.

Come, so that I can renew my covenant with you

– the covenant of Baptism by which I loved you and chose you and raised you from death for life in my Holy Spirit.

Come before me so that I can feed you with the bread of life and quench your thirst for grace with the cup of salvation.

Come so that I can send you into the world convinced of my
faithfulness,

Able to set aside worry and fear,

And, in the power of the Holy Spirit,

ready to act so that many will come to faith through you.

Come before me with your messy life,

- your sordid past,
- your distracted present,
- your sin-shadowed soul
- – and trust that I –for my name’s sake
- – and for the sake of my own beloved Son Jesus
- – **I will see you blameless and worthy to do my will**
- **Being the ancestor of many believers in Jesus the Savior.**

Yes, You.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.