

SERMON TITLE: "Our Covenant with God: The Covenant of Dust, Stars, Sand, and Circumcision"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 15:1, 5-6; and 17:1-11
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 11, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday, as I was reading the United Methodist News, I learned of a massacre of 19 people in Eastern Congo on September 27. The massacre was enacted by an armed rebel group. Six of those who lost their lives that day were United Methodist lay leaders traveling on a road to attend a district meeting. Three of them came from the same Momove United Methodist Church: Kakule Olenga was the choir director, Augustin Omeno was president of the United Methodist Men, and Muyisa Kambale was the church treasurer. Two of the victims were from the Mutuei United Methodist Church, where Mwayuma Shabani was secretary of the women's group; Okenge Junior was also a member there and served as the district evangelist. The sixth person, Abibu Chantal, was president of the United Methodist Women at the Samboko church.

The United Methodist News article told that these six congregational and district leaders were memorialized at their Annual Conference meeting this past week. The article didn't indicate any anger or doubt from those United Methodists gathered at that event. But can you imagine the extreme sadness and pain felt by their families, their congregations, their district, and their conference? Can you imagine the questions they might be asking God right now? "God, these were good people. They loved you, and they were serving you. For heaven's sake! They were on their way to a church meeting to serve you even more. How could you let this happen to them? Why didn't you protect them?"

It's a very human and normal experience to sometimes feel like a promise was shattered when life doesn't happen as we expect. We go about our lives with many big and small, conscious and unconscious, assumptions about how life should be. We may not even realize how much we counted on those expectations until something goes wrong. Then we feel disappointed at the very least. Sometimes we feel betrayed, violated, and devastated--like some kind of rule or covenant was broken.

During this month of October, we're talking about this idea of covenant. Covenant is a big topic in the Bible. Last week, we read about God's rainbow covenant with Noah. Today, we've just read about the covenant God made with Abraham. Let's see what this covenant meant for Abraham and what it might also mean for us.

1—COVENANT OF DUST, STARS, SAND

Biblical scholars and theologians usually just talk about this covenant between God and Abraham as the "Abrahamic covenant." But since, last week, we talked about the "rainbow covenant" between God and Noah, I thought we should find a symbolic way to speak of the agreement between God and Abraham. In fact, Genesis tells us that God gave Abraham at least four different signs for this covenant.

In Genesis 13:15-16, we learn that it was a *covenant of dust* because God told Abraham that he would give him all the land he could see, and that God would "make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted."

The relationship between God and Abraham was also a *covenant of stars* because, in Genesis 15:5, God took Abraham outside at night and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then God said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Likewise, the promise of God to Abraham was a *covenant of sand*. In Genesis 22:17, God told Abraham, "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore."

Dust, stars, and sand were all aspects of creation that God provided as visual signs to Abraham that the now 100-year old man wouldn't die without establishing a proper lineage to develop and thrive in this land where God had brought him. That promise may have been easier to believe when Abraham and Sarah were young adults. But, now, after they had become quite elderly, and Sarah still had not borne a child, God's promise seemed much harder to believe. But still, time and again, God reminded

Abraham that he would have a family, with descendants beyond number. Through the signs of the earth and sky, God spoke these words of promise. God gave this covenant of dust, stars, and sand.

2—COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION

But the relationship between God and Abraham wasn't only a one-way commitment. If Abraham was going to be a participant in this covenant relationship, then Abraham also had to provide a sign. He needed to indicate somehow that he truly believed God's promise. Abraham needed to give evidence that he was confident in God's ability to turn a 100-year old husband and an infertile 90-year old wife into parents. Abraham needed to provide proof of his trust that God was serious about giving Abraham millions of descendants who could carry out his dream and his righteousness of faith.

That Abrahamic sign of the covenant is what we read about in Genesis 17. There the symbol of the covenant was the circumcision of all the males—men and boys, free and slaves, and even foreigners living among them. Throughout the generations that would proceed from Abraham, circumcision would be the covenant sign—the sign that the people believed in and trusted God, the sign that they chose to be in this covenant relationship with God.

Without getting too graphic, I think we can all imagine what a strange leap of faith those very first acts of circumcision must have been for Abraham and those adults in his company. How could God ask such a thing? The act of circumcision might have seemed counterintuitive to Abraham, like the exact opposite of a remedy for reproductive dysfunction! But, while the practice of circumcision was new to Abraham who had migrated from the east, it wasn't a new idea in the western ancient world. There's archeological evidence that circumcision was practiced in Egypt as far back as 22 centuries before Christ. Likewise, Syrian warriors were circumcised at least 30 centuries before Christ.¹ So, Abraham—living about 18 centuries before Christ—must have finally come to accept the idea. Obviously, what he and Sarah had been doing hadn't produced an heir. So why not try something new?

God was giving Abraham assurance from the land and the sky. Abraham and his people would give God the pledge of their own bodies. Their relationship would be an everlasting covenant of dust, stars, sand, *and* circumcision.

3—OUR COVENANT WITH GOD

Fast forward to today, and we can affirm that the covenant between God and Abraham has lived on for almost 4000 years. The signs of that everlasting covenant are still around. In spite of wars, plagues, and the Holocaust—the population of Abraham’s biological and spiritual children has spread throughout the world. God has kept this promise to Abraham and his descendants to keep them and us alive on this earth. Hurricanes, wildfires, floods, terrorists, and earthquakes are no match for God. No matter what kind of disasters might come, God intends to uphold God’s part of the covenant.

But, like I said last week when we talked about the rainbow, a covenant is an agreement of two parties. God doesn’t make a covenant happen all alone. We have to agree to be in this covenant relationship. Like Noah and like Abraham, we have to do our part. When God says build an ark, we have to build. When God says, circumcise all the men and boys, that’s what has to be done. We have to be willing to undergo that attitude and faith adjustment that various biblical writers called the “circumcision of the heart.” We have to be committed to doing whatever it is that God needs us to do to ensure that life, hope, and faith will continue for generations and generations into the future.

In this time when the coronavirus has killed over a million people worldwide and over 200,000 in the U.S.—maybe God’s promise is to do everything in God’s power to see us through this pandemic and keep the human race alive. Maybe our part of the covenant is to wear our masks, social distance, seek professional help with physical and mental health issues, and get our vaccines whenever they are known to be safe and available.

An article in Friday’s *Salt Lake Tribune* quoted a doctor who was extremely frustrated because we Utahns haven’t been taking COVID-19 seriously enough. He said maybe our lax behavior is because

those who are extremely ill are often isolated and hidden away from us in long term care facilities or ICU beds. We don't see those people who are dying alone, without their families and without their friends. Only the medical staff feel the horrific weight of all that suffering and death. As the COVID death toll in Utah exceeded 500, the doctor was pleading for us to take our responsibility seriously and do our part to keep ourselves and others safe. In other words, the covenant of dust, stars, sand, *and* circumcision is up to us, as well as God.

CONCLUSION

A couple days ago, I read a poem written by a Native American by the name of Thomas King. In the poem, he wonders what might have been different if, instead of being suppressed, Native Americans had been the leaders of North America over the past couple centuries. He wonders what it would have been like if our whole North American society had been governed by the Native American belief that we live our days "under the gaze of generations watching us, of generations still intact, of generations still to be, seven forward, seven back."²

I think Abraham could have related to that seventh-generation responsibility to carry out the dreams of our elders and to establish the possibilities of life for our great, great, great, great, grandchildren. Let's believe in God's faithfulness, and let's practice ours. God's covenant with us has brought us innumerable blessings. Our covenant with God calls us to do our part to imagine and act for that better future for all God's children. This is the meaning for us today in the covenant of dust, stars, sand, and circumcision.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, A-C, Vol. 1, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2006), p. 668.

² <https://www.facinghistory.org/stolen-lives-indigenous-peoples-canada-and-indian-residential-schools/chapter-2/i-m-not-indian-you-had-mind>