

THE COVENANT TO CARE AND TO KEEP

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Text: 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 moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

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This has been an eventful month in the Hoffman Faeth household. In the early days of February, we trekked across the country to return my oldest daughter to college in Boston. Ellie had been home for 11 months, since the onset of the pandemic, and having her at home was a great gift in this unsettling time. I really enjoy the humans my children have become, and living with Ellie as an adult was filled with much delight. And while returning to a life she loves in a city that makes her feel whole is absolutely necessary, the pain of goodbye and the long distance that we are now from one another has settled intensely on my spirit. Hannah, my younger daughter, and I returned from our East Coast sojourn in the midst of a nor'easter, which to this Midwesterner seems a fancy word for a good ol' snowstorm. Whether here or there, it is not my favorite kind of weather to drive through, and after two relentless days of precarious travel, I was so happy to be back in Minnesota, in spite of the melancholy in my heart. I had just enough time to recover so as to celebrate fully Hannah's 17th birthday, followed two days later by Hannah passing her driving test and securing her license. We collectively cried “Liberation!” as I acknowledge two decades of driving children here, there, and everywhere coming to a close. And Hannah, having already claimed the spare car that sits in our driveway, is quickly settling in to her new-found freedom, plotting ways to earn money for gas and insurance. God promises Abram and Sarai that they will have descendants more plentiful than stars in the sky, and the first thing I think of is that is way too many children to teach how to drive. I barely survived instructing two. And poor Ellie and Hannah: They prayed daily for someone—anyone—to show up in the passenger seat beside them rather than their overreactive, control-freak, backseat-driver of a mother. It is a wonder we have all lived to tell the story.

I have been pondering the covenant of parenting long before Lent began, but moreso in this season of reflection. As the only parent of two vibrant, ever evolving young women, I am aware of the tender tension between encouraging their independent choices and feeling ever protective of their safekeeping. How do I shelter Ellie from the potential dangers of the world from 1,000 miles away? How do I ever allow Hannah to leave the driveway when violent carjacking is happening at an alarming rate in our communities? Before my children were even conceived, I made a promise to love them unconditionally, to be ever present

through even the most excruciating moments, to always put them first in my list of competing priorities. And at times I have failed miserably. I shudder to remember the many instances when I let them down, made the wrong choice, broke my covenant. Grace does not only come from God, it is often demonstrated from those we love, too. And grace extended has filled in some of the brokenness, so we could look upon one another with renewed hope and fulfilled love.

The covenant that God proffers to Abraham and Sarah in our scripture today is not the only one God extended to the couple. They have already been promised many blessings, and descendants as numerous as the stars—a curious covenant to a couple yet unable to bear children and now well into their ninth decade of life. The covenant in the 17th chapter of Genesis is a reiteration of the prior covenants, this time marked with a change of name and an establishment of greatness: their descendants not only plentiful, but also a lineage of royalty. Decades have passed since God uttered God’s first covenant with Abram. We might think the couple has been patient waiting for fulfillment, but instead they have tried to manipulate and manufacture God’s promises with disastrous results. Even so God decrees that now is the time, and the couple is still deserving. Perhaps that is why God changes their names—to create new purpose out of old promises. After all, even though they have yet to become parents of one child, much less the parents of a nation, they have continued in relationship with God and in the care and keeping of one another. And from this covenant three religions will be born, claiming Abraham as their grandfather in faith. God will be their God. And they will be God’s people. The covenant continues. This isn’t just the story about an old couple and God. This is the story of God and God’s whole people—which includes us—and will be the lens through which we discern how to live faithfully with God, the land, and one another. This covenant offers us the gift of hope, the source of identity, and a place in creation. It is a promise of perpetual presence, God’s primacy throughout the fulfillment of history. In order for Abraham and Sarah to fulfill God’s covenant to be “ancestors of a multitude of nations,” they had to extend their commitment of care past one another onto their descendants and all generations to come. And so within this ancient promise is an invitation from God to return and renew that which is the essence of our humanity—the extension of God’s protective, loving care upon the other. We are called into a covenant to care and to keep.

During this season of Lent, we have invited you to consider covenant and its meaning and purpose in your life. And we invite you, through the exploration of the covenants found in the First Testament, between God and the faithful yet flawed people that we are, to consider what work we might have to do to return to the promises God makes through these ancient figures, which essentially is to each one of us.

A tenet of Congregationalism is that we are not bound by creed or doctrine. One does not need to adhere to a particular set of beliefs in order to be a member of a Congregational church. Because we understand God in our midst in many and varied ways, this freedom invites us to interpret God to bring meaning and significance into our life of faith. Members of Congregational churches choose to partner together in spiritual community through an acceptance of covenant. This covenant expresses promises to God and to one another. Every Congregational community, upon its formation as a church, develops a covenant, or a set of promises to which each member commits. Puritan William Ames wrote, “Believers, simply as an assembly, do not constitute a church even though they may regularly meet together. Only unification through covenant, with its shared commitment to perform requisite duties towards God and toward one another, creates church estate.”¹

Some of you can recite Plymouth’s covenant by memory, and others of you may not be at all familiar with it. I invite you to say it with me now, following along with the words on the screen:

¹John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*.

We covenant with you, O God, and one with another, and do bind ourselves in your presence to walk together in all your ways, according as you are pleased to reveal yourself to us in your blessed word of truth.

This one sentence covers a lot of territory, yet the piece that stirs my heart the most is that within these few words is a promise to bind ourselves to one another, reminiscent of a marriage vow or a parental commitment, in that even within the fierce independence of the Congregational Way we are little without the ones with whom we travel. Like Abraham and Sarah, we are not only in relationship with one another but must also consider the generations yet to come, the ones who will inherit the church community we build, those who will perpetuate our legacy. As in a marriage or parental covenant, we are charged to love one another through disagreements and disappointments, not letting go of the other because we don't approve of their behavior or their viewpoint or their understanding of worship or interpretation of the scripture or dissection of our bylaws. Within these few words, the only written documentation that draws a circle of inclusion around this community, is the directive to love one another, to hold one another up, and to treat tenderly this tie that binds. As people of covenant, we are called to work together to discern how God is revealing Godself to us in this time. To care and to keep means that ours is a relationship rooted in love, demonstrated through kindness, held steadfast and yet gentle, which endures even through conflict and change. Indeed, to care and to keep is to "bear all things." We hold one another accountable to this covenant and should expect of the other the same care we are to offer. This pandemic has made abundantly clear just how much we need each other, and existing in isolation breaks down the spirit in unbearable ways. Our covenanted community invites us to turn towards one another rather than away so as to know we are never truly alone. In the hard work of justice, in the practice of peace, in our songs of joy, in the woes of our sorrow, we are the ancestors of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, and we are now the ones who must care and keep this covenant of community. The additional lessons of this time have shown us that we must demonstrate this commitment of care creatively and consistently even when we cannot be together. Like a parent whose fierce love penetrates the 1,000 miles that separate her from her college-aged daughter, we continue to manifest ways to bind ourselves together from a distance. And as our church community grows and expands past geographic boundary, may our hearts break open in imaginative pursuits of compassionate relationship.

May we return and renew to our covenant of care and keeping, ever mindful of the need to be extenders of grace, wellsprings of forgiveness, centered in hope, bound to one another in love and through the transforming presence of God. Amen.