



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

BLOOD, LAND AND BLESSING: THE SECOND COVENANT

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2015

Readings (Year B RCL): Genesis 17;1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Sermon text: “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” Genesis 17:7

“Imagine there’s no countries. It isn’t hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion too.”

I was thinking about “Imagine,” the great John Lennon song this week and googled it. The line “and no religion too” naturally kind of disturbs me (what will I do?!) and I was surprised to learn that there was a positive Christian influence behind the song. When asked about the song’s meaning during a December 1980 interview with David Sheff for *Playboy* magazine, Lennon told Sheff that Dick Gregory (remember him, the comedian and civil rights activist) had given Ono and him a Christian prayer book, which helped inspire in Lennon what he described as: “The concept of positive prayer ... If you can imagine a world at peace, with no denominations of religion—not without religion but without this my God-is-bigger-than-your-God thing—then it can be true ...”

I think that is a very good thing: let us stop using religion as a stick to beat other people with—or ourselves. And part of that task will be relearning what religion is supposed to do: connect us to God and each other. Imagine that. And let us reflect particularly this morning on what the covenant with Abraham is supposed to do, call on all the children of Abraham, Jews, Christians and Muslims, to be a blessing to the world—and not a curse.

To get a big picture view of this covenant, let's go back in time to about 2000 years before the birth of Christ, to what was at the time perhaps the most populous city on earth, Ur of Chaldea—all of about 65,000 human souls. Ur was a Sumerian city—one of the oldest inhabited cities on earth. They had agriculture, irrigation, herding, writing (“Gilgamesh” was Sumerian, the first recorded poem), bronze age metallurgy—all of these had been achieved in the Mesopotamian area and larger Fertile Crescent of the Middle East (as well as few other valleys around the world) in the years from 10,000 BCE or so to 2000.

But around 2200-2000 a severe drought brought low the city (along with a contributing factor, extensive irrigation practices that led to increased salinity in the water—as then, so now). Perhaps this was when Abram heard God call him to leave the land of his fathers and go to a land that God would show him. This is laid out in chapter 12 of Genesis. God also tells Abram that not only would he and his descendants be an especially blessed people, but they would be a blessing to all the nations: “and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3; cf Gen. 22:18; 26:4). So Abram took his wife Sarai and nephew Lot and some servants and animals and headed out. Then in chapter 15 we hear of a night vision in which God tells Abram to sacrifice a set of animals, cutting them in halves and surrounding them with smoky torches. Then God promises Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the sand and stars, and the land where God has brought him—roughly Israel—will be their land.

This covenant remained unfulfilled for years—Sarai was barren and then beyond child-bearing years. So her servant Hagar was used as a surrogate mother and to her a son was born, Ishmael. But Sarai was jealous of Hagar and drove her off. A fair amount of family dynamics ensued. The end result was that God told Abram that Ishmael would himself be the father of kings—and indeed Arabs consider themselves descendants of Abraham through Ishmael.

But for Jews the covenant line was carried on through a miraculous restoration of fertility to Sarai. This is the scene we have heard this morning—chapter 17 is a restatement of the covenant with Abram in which Abram is renamed Abraham, and Sarai Sarah, the promises of descendants and land are repeated, and circumcision required of all males. This is to be a sign of the special covenant with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah through the son to be born of these two elderly but faithful people, both near 100 years old. They couldn't help but laugh at the very idea (Genesis 17:17, 18:12; Isaac means “he laughs” Genesis 21:3).

So here we have a covenant of blood and land. Jews and Arabs—children of blood from Isaac and Ishmael—make up a pretty impressive number of people, though hardly as numerous as the stars—there are about 14 million Jews in the

world today and about 422 million people within the Arabic speaking nations. And the two tribes of descendants even now occupy Israel (another name of Isaac's son Jacob) and much of the Middle East—fighting between and among themselves for much of recorded history and to this day.

But Arabs and Jews are not the only children of Abraham. As Paul notes in our second reading this morning, the first covenant was sealed by faith—Abraham believed in and trusted the promises of God—and so is the “father” of all believers in the God revealed to him, the one God of all the children of Abraham, Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. “And God reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:22-23).

If you count up the children of Abraham by faith, Christians and non-Arabic Muslims of all lands—well, you start getting into some big numbers, about 2 billion Christians and about 1.5 billion Muslims, roughly half of the 7 billion or so people living today (and on our way, come hell or high water, to 9 or 10 billion, after which the trend line may plateau and start down—or else ecological and man-made catastrophes will do the dirty work).

That's enough people to make a difference if they all could agree on abiding by the basic covenant of care for creation and the Abrahamic covenant of becoming a blessing to all people. That's enough to change the direction of history. That's enough to start bringing true shalom, salaam, peace to a world in desperate need of it.

But that is not what we see today, is it? Especially in the Islamic world we see a reactionary revolt against history, a deep but distorted desire to return to a remembered period of power and glory and supposed pure religion. Just this week, the news reported Assyrian Christians—I didn't even know they were still around—being killed and driven from their ancestral villages. We also see Jewish settlers invoking old passages of the Old Testament, including some of the Genesis passages we hear today, to justify settler expansion on the West Bank (after all, they say, Jews were promised the land “to the River”). Ancient patterns of shared residence are ripped apart and religious zealots use God's name to justify brutal and evil acts of death.

Yet Jews, Muslims and Christians alike are children of Abraham! Not to mention children of God. Humanity is commanded right in the first covenant not to murder—and yet violence is all too common. As people of faith, children of Abraham, members of the second covenant, we are called to be a blessing to all the peoples—but are we? Or is religion, as some think, a curse?

On January 14 of this year, there was a massive march in Paris to show unity in opposition to the extremist violence committed in the name of Islam by the murderers who killed the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists. During the march a person with an apartment on the street played music out her window. When the John Lennon song “Imagine” came on, the people started singing along until at the end there was a united chorus of tens of thousands:

Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
(feel free to insert your youhoo-oo here)

You may say I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope someday you’ll join us
And the world will be as one

Let us join with people of good will and all faiths or none and join in both imagining and helping bring about a world of peace, unity and care for creation.

In Christ’s name, amen.

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