

Faith Walk! - Sermon Discussion

Date : 27 March 2022
Sermon Title : Covenant People
Speaker : Rev Shannon Chan
Text : Genesis 17

INTRODUCTION

Although God made a covenant with Abram that his offspring will inherit the land of Canaan and their number will be as large as the number of stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5), he remained childless after the promise and so grew restless for an heir. Genesis 16 records the event when Abraham took a seriously wrong turn by trying to help God to achieve what he felt was far too hard for God. He followed Sarai's advice to produce that heir God had promised him by sleeping with her maid Hagar. While that was a social practice of their time, it betrayed the trust and obedience required of the couple while waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled. From this union, Ishmael was born, whom some scholars deemed as "a child of the flesh", instead of "the child of a promise". This act led to huge disunity and heartbreaks for all involved. This difficult state of relationships lasted 13 years, but these were not wasted years as they serve to illustrate to us, even today, the consequences of serving God in the power of the flesh and of the problem of acting presumptuously. After 13 years God's silence was broken and a new aspect of God's grace opened before Abram.

2 new developments in Genesis 17:

1. ***God asserts His relationship with His covenant people, beginning with Abraham*** (Genesis 17:1-8)

After 13 years of silence God appears to Abram in a new revelation with a new name.

- God Almighty (*Hebrew: El Shaddai*), "the God who is sufficient"
 - The all competent, all adequate God who knows what He is doing and how to do it.

This reveals that Abram has learnt something – He learned for thirteen years of the total inadequacy of his own efforts through Ishmael. He needed to learn a new thing about God who is El Shaddai. Abram discovered how futile his plans and efforts were without God. He had to learn how able God is to do everything He desires, whenever He desires to do it.

For we walk by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7

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Lesson: Like Abram, we need to discover this truth. We need desperately to recover the reality of El Shaddai, the God who is sufficient, the need to trust Him for all we are going through and not take things into our own hands. This is what Abram learned.

- ✓ **Covenant people will discover only God is truly all sufficient**
- God's assigning of new names to Abram and Sarai
 - (i) Assigning of new name as an act of authority

Assigning new names for the couple (Abraham and Sarah) indicate an expansion of God's covenant to Abram in Gen 12. In assigning this new name 'Abraham', God declares that He will make him "A father of many nations".

- (ii) Assigning of new name is also a great privilege - It represents statements of blessings and destiny
- ✓ **It represents the hopes and dreams of the one assigning the new name. God will shape Abraham's character over time to a whole new dimension in his life. In the name change, God was shaping the one God would call "God's friend" (James 2:22-23). What a privilege!**

2. ***God requires His covenant people to be set apart*** (Genesis 17:9-27)

- Circumcision is the sign of covenant.
Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin of the male procreative organ. Some scholars interpret it as literally carving into the flesh a sign of God's Lordship and possession. A reminder to God's people then, of their obligations and privileges under the covenant. It was placed on this part of their body to indicate that they were to be physically separate from the other nations.
- Circumcision is also the shaping of the heart.
Physical circumcision was a reminder of a deeper reality God wanted to convey to His people; the circumcision of the heart that was within them. They were to be cut out from the other nations, to be set apart for God to be in covenant relationship with Him. Like all covenantal signs, physical circumcision could easily become an empty ritual.
- ✓ **Circumcision had to be accompanied with faith to have genuine meaning**

What was physical is to have spiritual significance for us:

In the New Testament we no longer read about circumcision of the flesh but circumcision of the heart. The heart is the symbol of the soul which includes the

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mind, emotions, will and the whole personality of the individual. Every believer of Christ must bear on their hearts the signs of Christ's Lordship so that their lives will be at God's disposal.

Christians' choice in their faith and life decisions

It is no accident that in Genesis 17, circumcision is brought to the fore in the context of Ishmael and Isaac. The let's-help God Ishmael way is put side by side with the wait-upon-God Isaac way. And it's right here that the "heart" choice is oftentimes a hard choice.

Unfortunately, God's covenant people do choose the let's-help-God Ishmael way -

We help God when:

- we don't like God's way and we ignore it, edit it, or add to it.
- we fail to pray but act, and when we can't wait for God to act because we think He will be too slow.
- we use social customs and usual practices since 'everyone else is doing it'.

Reflections:

If we cannot and will not wait upon God and it results in a mess, should we say let's pray and ask God to intervene and save us from the mess? Or do we call the mess that results spiritual oppression, when actually we are our own oppressors, or our own worst enemy? Or should we be calling for repentance before God? Maybe at times like this, what we really need is a circumcision of heart!

What does choosing the wait-upon-God Isaac way do? Waiting upon God will often expose our vulnerabilities and personalities contrary to what God wants of us.

- It exposes our doubts and expectations about what God would do.
- It did expose a control streak a mile wide and a begrudging heart.
- It refines our hearts.
- Like for Abraham, it is a call to trust and obedience even when it meant risking God's goodness when God wanted him to sacrifice his only star, Isaac.

As a Christian writer and spiritual director underscores: Waiting is God's crucible for transformation. Waiting is how God gets at the idols of our heart. Waiting addresses the things we need besides God to be content: money, comfort, expedience, success (the way we define it!), or control".

CONCLUSION – God's invitation

To let go of your need to be in control of people and circumstances so you can trust that God is at hand in the moment as it unfolds even if it doesn't unfold the way you think it should.

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A. Review Sermon Application

Purpose: Reflect on how you have been embodying God's truth.

1. a. How successful have you been in fulfilling what you/your group had committed to do for the last FaithWalk!?
- b. What were some challenges you faced and what would you like to celebrate?

2. Appoint someone to read Genesis 17, slowly.

We are followers of Christ Jesus, set apart by the circumcision of the heart for God's purposes. Physical circumcision results in a tangible physical mark. What evidence is there in your personal life to suggest that you are circumcised in the heart for Christ?

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B. Relate Sermon Content

Purpose: Relate with the Truth and Resolve for Transformation.

3. The God revealed in Genesis 17 is *El-Shaddai*, the Lord who is all sufficient. Do you live your life fully trusting in the sufficiency of God?
 - a. If you have, how has He been the sufficient God to you? How can you thank Him for His providence in your life?
 - b. If you have not, what are some things you have depended on besides God that you need to remove and instead seek Him for all your needs?

- 4a. Is waiting on the Lord difficult for you?
- 4b. Consider some of your current challenges at home, work or ministry. How inclined are you to choose the "let's-help-God Ishmael way"?
 - (i) What are some challenges you have experienced being still before the Lord to wait for His answers and response?
 - (ii) What is one thing you need to change in order to adopt the "wait-upon-God Isaac way"?
 - (iii) How can your group members help or encourage you to achieve 4b(ii) above, for the following week(s) till your next meeting?

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C. Testimonies and Prayer

Purpose: Give glory to God and seek Him.

5. Share your testimony on how you have experienced the grace of God when you turned to Him with circumcised heart after getting into a mess that you brought upon yourself due to your unwillingness to wait upon Him before you acted. Include the lessons you have learnt from this?

OR

Give thanks to God for how your life has been different or changed because you have become His covenant people through accepting Christ Jesus as your Redeemer.

6. With a prayer partner, seek the Holy Spirit's leading to be shaped into a servant for God at your various spheres of influence and interaction, set apart to do the good works for His glory and purpose, even if it means waiting. Pray also for God's empowerment and love to support one another in 4b(iii) above.

As a group, pray that our church, as God's covenant people will seek the Lord with circumcised heart that is accompanied by faith so we may resist the urge to be impatient and rely on personal instincts and preferences when faced with challenges of the day, but rather be still before God, prayerfully seeking His leading and responses.

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