

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Children of God: In the Flesh”

Rev. Amy Morgan

July 27, 2014

Genesis 17:9-14

God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.’

Romans 8:26-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Scatched onto a wall at Auschwitz are three lines of a poem:

I believe in the sun even when it’s not shining.

I believe in love even when I don’t feel it.

I believe in God even when He is silent.

The person who wrote these words was surely experiencing the terrifying silence of God. As the camp’s inhabitants were led, as Psalm 44 says, “as sheep to be slaughtered,” this person managed to keep faith somehow, to believe in a God who would stand silently aloof in the face of this human atrocity.

What is it that makes such faith possible? To use the poem’s reasoning, when clouds obscure the sun, we don’t give up hope of seeing its rays or turn to believing it was a figment of our imaginations. Likewise, when we don’t feel love, it is the hope of someday finding it that keeps us going. Most of us don’t give up on the notion of love entirely each time our heart is broken or we feel lonely or outcast.

But when God is silent, when God doesn't come through for us, when God fails to provide what we want or need when we want or need it, well, we begin to wonder. We begin to question. Not just about the existence of God. But about the character of God. About the trustworthiness of God. Are we really safe following this God? Does God have our best interests in mind?

We might imagine these kinds of questions arose for Abraham fairly regularly throughout his life with God. God made a profound promise to Abraham, a long-term investment in him, as John said last week.

But in our text today, that promise is still in jeopardy. God promised Abraham a land and a people who would be as numerous as the stars and who would bless all the nations of the earth. But Abraham and Sarah are old. The clock isn't just ticking for them – that ticker is dead and done for. Abraham's son Ishmael is still in the picture, but because Hagar is a slave and not Abraham's wife, Ishmael is a somewhat tenuous offspring to carry so weighty a promise. God has been anything but silent, but Abraham is at the point where actions will speak louder than words.

At the time this story from Genesis was likely written down, somewhere around the 5th century BC, Abraham's descendants were in captivity in Babylon. They knew God as the one who resided in, and spoke to them from, the temple in Jerusalem. How, then, could they hear God speak to them in a foreign land? In God's silence, they feared losing their cultural and religious identity. They were surrounded by people who seemed to prosper from the provision of other gods. Was their God - this God who would abandon them in their captivity - really trustworthy? Was God for them or against them?

When the world erupts in violent chaos, when our lives begin to quickly unravel, when we pray for a sign that never comes, when God is silent in our distress, it is easy to question the trustworthiness of God. We wonder if we can really count on God, "lean on the everlasting arms," and "take everything to God in prayer." Is Jesus really our friend if he won't heal our loved ones from illness or protect our children from harm? Can we lean on one who allows us to fall into sin and fail to love our neighbors? When we look around our lives and our world, Christ's promise to be with us always, "even to the end of the age" sounds hollow.

But if a person in a Nazi death camp can see God differently, if an inmate of Auschwitz can have faith in the face of God's silence, perhaps we can retain our trust in God, even through the worst of our life experiences.

But it may require us to look more closely at our understanding of God's promises and the character of God.

When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church, Jews, including those who were Christian, had only recently been allowed to return to the city after having been expelled for several years. In the meantime, the churches had been populated with Gentiles, and the Jewish and Gentile Christians now had to work to find common ground on any number of beliefs and practices, including the question of whether or not Gentile Christians had to be circumcised. And so, it became of crucial importance to articulate what circumcision meant, and what it did not mean.

When God commanded Abraham to be circumcised, and to circumcise all in his tribe, God was putting the covenant promise into the flesh of the people. It was a lived theology of providence, a physical reminder of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham to be the God of his people. It was not a badge of honor to be worn like a Star-Bellied Sneech. It wasn't a promise that life would always go well for God's people. Instead, it was a sign of God's trustworthiness. Because as long as there are people on this earth who bear God's covenant in their flesh, the descendants of Abraham continue, and therefore God's promise lives on. Circumcision ultimately meant – for Abraham, for the Israelites in Babylon, and for the Jews in Auschwitz – that God would keep God's promise to be their God forever. God would not allow Abraham to remain childless or the Israelites to become subsumed into Babylonian culture or for all of the Jews to be exterminated as Hitler desired. Circumcision was a sign that even when God is silent, God is still faithful to the promise.

The Roman Christians struggled with that reality as they faced opposition from their families and friends and eventually persecution from the Roman emperor. At the beginning of our reading today, Paul assures the church that God does indeed hear their prayers, even though it may not seem like it. Imagine the subtext of these verses: the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

We might imagine that things aren't going well for the Roman Christians. We can imagine the letter written to Paul by the Roman church. Dear Paul, we have prayed for God to help us. It doesn't seem to be working. We're not seeing God come through for us. Bad things are happening to us because of our faith in Jesus. Are we doing something wrong?

And Paul says, no, you're not doing it wrong. This is how life is. It's no different for Christians. But just because God is silent doesn't mean God isn't trustworthy. In fact, God is at work, God's Spirit is interceding for you when you don't even know what or how to pray. You can't possibly do it wrong. And even though bad things are happening, God can use them for good.

Paul goes on to reassure the church that nothing they can do and nothing that is done to them can separate them from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

According to Genesis, being uncircumcised means a Jewish man is cut off from God's people. But according to Paul, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Through circumcision, God put the covenant with Abraham in the flesh of God's people. But in Jesus Christ, there is a new covenant, an everlasting covenant with all people, which is not marked in our flesh. Instead, this covenant is God in the flesh. This does not in any way negate the necessity of circumcision for the Jewish people. As Jesus himself said, "I come not to abolish the law but to uphold it." God's covenant with Abraham remains, and it remains in the flesh of the descendants of Abraham.

But in the covenant God establishes in Jesus Christ, God promises to be with us always, to love us always, no matter what happens to us in our lives. Like circumcision, it is a lived theology, alive and present in the person of Jesus Christ. And like circumcision, it lives on through each new generation as the body of Christ remains in the world, continuing his ministry on earth.

God's covenant in Jesus Christ continues in the flesh of each person gathered here, each person, who, as Paul says, is "called according to his purpose." God is at work, through the Holy Spirit, in me and in you and in all who follow Christ's call to "come and follow me." The mark of Christ placed upon us in baptism is the only sign we need to live out God's promise, to be a part of God's redeeming work in the world.

The writer of the poem at Auschwitz understood that the trustworthiness of God has no direct correlation with our life's circumstances. Holocausts and plagues, exiles and persecutions are the realities of a fallen creation. When Paul says that We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, he doesn't mean that only good things happen to those who love God. It means that God can work even the violence and hatred, the death and destruction into something good that serves the purpose of redeeming the world. This also doesn't affirm the adage "everything happens for a reason." Life happens, people make choices, we live and we die, we are broken and we are put back together. And through it all, God has chosen to love us and is working God's purpose out in and through us.

We are the promise of God, in the flesh, the living, breathing new covenant. In the face of God's silence, we believe in God. Because the sun will shine again. And we will feel love again. And we will see God's goodness again. Because nothing, nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Amen.