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First in series on God's Faithfulness

Boone UMC, commission Zoe & Cherokee

God is Faithful

Our world is awash in wrong views of God. This is why Christians should be the best atheists around. Let me explain.

Many people in the church and out think God is there to meet my needs. To make good things happen for me. Bad things happening are a sign of God's neglect or anger. So God is like a rabbit's foot, a talisman, a magic good luck charm. Here's the problem. Everyone can see it's false. As Billy Joel memorably sang, "Only the good die young." Terrible things happen to good and holy people all the time; while genuinely terrible people die peacefully in their beds of old age. If God's job is to make things turn out right, then Christians should be atheists about that god. That god doesn't exist. He isn't real.

Today is the first in a series of sermons on God's faithfulness. God is faithful, but this does not mean God is there to be a butler to give us what we want. Nor does it mean God corrects the wrong immediately and the way we want (God is remarkably patient with us sinners—the woman who cut me off in traffic last week is really thankful for this. So am I). God is faithful to his promises to Israel, to his promises to the church, to our promises in baptism. But belief in God is not like winning the lottery where all our troubles are solved. Far from it. And I know full well I say this to folks struggling: with loss of job, cancer, estranged loved ones, loss of hope. God's word to you today is that he is faithful. That doesn't mean a Hollywood ending all the time, not even usually. But it does mean whatever happens God will go there with you, all the way to his cross, or yours. Hear this word.

Genesis 17:1-8

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. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 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. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 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. 8 And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.

9 God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 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 your offspring. 13 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. 14 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.

15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." 17 Then

Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" 18 And Abraham said to God, O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" 19 God said, "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. 20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. 21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." 22 And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Last week I started off with a Jewish story, it seems to be what people liked best about the sermon, so I'll go that way again. The great philosopher Martin Buber tells a story from the rabbis. Abram's name here is changed. Abram means something like "exalted ancestor." Abraham means "father of many." Only difference is that h sound. Hah. What other biblical word does an "h" appear in? Yahweh. Two h's in fact. God had an h to spare so he dropped a bit of his name into Abram's. God is not greedy, God is generous, and gives a bit of himself to humanity. I love that. Because that's who God is in Christ, he gives himself fully to us and changes our name. Think of that every time you hear the letter h.

I love this theme we're on for the next six weeks, God's faithfulness. Because God is always faithful in ways we don't expect. Let me give you an example. Karl Rahner, great mid-20th century Catholic theologian said that on Easter morning no one was more surprised than Jesus himself. That is, Jesus knew God would be faithful and deliver him. But didn't know precisely how. Imagine Jesus waking up, whoah, that was weird. Ok, I knew God would do what he said, didn't realize that whole three days in the grave thing was part of it. God's faithfulness is weird. And then it's delightful.¹ There's the whole sermon for today or at least the first point. God's faithfulness is weird and then it's delightful.

Take Abram, 99 years old, he's heard from God about his covenant before and he's uprooted his life from his father's land and gone in obedience. He has a child by his slave girl—you know, just in case this whole divine promise thing doesn't work out he's got a backup plan. God needs no backup plan.² "I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous . . . this is my covenant with you: You shall be ancestor of a multitude of nations."³ Notice this is like God's original command to Adam, "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." Abram is to do what God intended for humanity to do from the beginning. God promises a royal promise to Abram,⁴ "I will make nations come out of you, and kings shall come from you." I remember here the movie about Queen Elizabeth, when she didn't want to dispatch her plane to bring Princess Diana's body back to England. Prince Charles said he didn't think it was too much to send a plane to bring the mother of the future king of England home. To produce a king is world-changing. God promises Abram will produce so many they can't be counted. And God says this is an eternal promise.⁵ This will be "an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring after you." Abram will be numerous like the sands on the sea or the stars in the sky. He'll make kings and nations. The covenant is eternal and unbreakable.¹ We're a long way from God giving me a parking place or the job or girl I want, or even God healing all my ailments or making my pain go away. Do you see how God changes our perspective from me and what I want (tiny!) to God and the blessing of the whole universe? God is always greater than we think.

¹ I. God's faithfulness is weird and delightful

² Gen 17:2-3 on screen plz.

³ Gen 1:28

⁴ 17:6 on screen

⁵ Gen 17:8 on screen

And here's something weird and delightful about it. Scholars think this passage was first written down in the exile in Babylon. God says in this text he'll bless Abram's people forever, give them land, prosper them. But the people writing it down are in exile in some other land, conquered, not blessed, face pushed down in the mud, nearly destroyed. At the moment of God's writing this it didn't seem to be true. Do you ever find yourself wondering? As you face cancer, a grandchild far from God, a body that won't do what you want, if God means it when he says he loves us? So did the people in the bible. And they wrote this story down to bear witness to us that yes, God is faithful. We don't always know how he'll show himself faithful. But he will.

Reynolds Price was Duke's most famous English professor and novelist for many years. He tells a story about his fight with spinal cancer. He had a vision (not a dream he insists) he was by the Sea of Galilee with Jesus and the disciples. And Jesus beckoned him into the water and started to wash his spine gently. Then Jesus said "Your sins are forgiven," and walked away. Quite done with him. Reynolds called out, "Well am I cured?!" Wasn't my sins I was worried about just now, thank you. Jesus turned back around and said, "That too." God is always worried about something bigger than we are—he's trying to make us holy while we're hustling to try to get ahead. Holiness means learning to want what God wants. From something little (curing) to something enormous (forgiveness).

Two,⁶ God's promise is scandalous. It is odd, at best, to think of the God of the universe, of all that is, choosing one little backwater people to be his own. Israel. You'd think God would choose the best. Babylon, or Greece, or Rome, but God chooses the least, the sorriest, a people no one had heard of. If God were choosing baseball teams you'd think he'd choose the Yankees, or this year the Orioles. But God chooses the Cubs. Every year. I'm thinking about this as we leave for Cherokee today. The Cherokee are a great tribe, began their life on this continent, Turtle Island (as Indians have long called North America) near the Great Lakes, migrated down south, forced at gunpoint out to Oklahoma in the Trail of Tears, but one group stole away and stayed in western NC. Why didn't God choose that tribe instead of the tribe of Judah? Don't all tribes have their own gods, and Israel is no different? Shouldn't God be an equal opportunity God and have no favorites?

The answer to all this is our story in Genesis. God chooses Abram. Why? No idea. Never says. Just a mystery. Theologians call it the scandal of particularity. If we were God we'd be equal opportunity to all, like the UN or a good teacher in a classroom with no teacher's pets. But God says, you, Abram, you, Israel, you're mine in a way no other tribe is.

The scandal of particularity gets even more scandalous. God says, "Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."⁷ You can imagine Abram listening along and saying, uh, wait a minute, you want to cut my what? Faith in the biblical God is not a cerebral affair. It's not like learning your multiplication tables or the list of presidents. Faith in God is a bodily affair. It is marked in flesh. Poured out in baptism. Eaten in communion. Passed hand to hand, from one to another.⁸ "So shall my covenant be *in your flesh* an everlasting covenant." Why circumcision? No idea. We're never told. But Israel's problems often have to do with offspring. No child or the wrong child. God's promises are always under threat. And this sign in Abram's flesh suggests that. Faith is a matter of being peculiarly marked. And I know this seems weird (God meant it to!)—but look what nearly every college kid is doing with tattoos and piercings. Marking themselves in their flesh. Telling their story in pain and permanence. Maybe God's idea is something we want after all.

Now there are dangers to chosenness. Being chosen can seem like you can do no wrong. Being God's preferred people can seem like a free pass. Hey, we're God's people, he likes whatever we do. Need I say this?

⁶ II. The scandal of particularity

⁷ Gen 17:10-11 up plz

⁸ Gen 17:13, note emphasis.

This is nonsense. The Nazis marched into battle with belt buckles that read “God is with us.” One of Israel’s problems today in the Middle East is they seem to think they can do no wrong. Good thing our nation has ever struggled with that. Of course Israel’s enemies also think they’re in the right, that God has blessed them against Israel. Isn’t this whole notion of a tribal God the problem?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw this clearly in his day as he resisted the Nazis in his home country Germany. He argued that we have to read the bible against ourselves and not for ourselves. To be chosen doesn’t mean you can get away with whatever you want. It means you’re bound to God.⁹ “Walk before me and be blameless,” God commands. Or even stronger,¹⁰ “Walk before me *and be perfect.*” God has high expectations for those he chooses. As Spiderman says, “with great power comes great responsibility.” Or as God says, want to be my people? Then love like I love. Very early on in Israel’s history being circumcised became a metaphor for moral obedience.¹¹ “Circumcise then *the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn* any longer.” Jeremiah the prophet screeches,¹² “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts . . . or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn with no one to quench it.” God says you want my faithfulness? Then obey. Cut yourself this way. Follow these laws. I mean it. Or else. Tevye’s character from *Fiddler on the Roof* talking to God says maybe God should choose someone else. How about the Slovenians? They’re not busy. “If this is what it means to be your chosen couldn’t you choose somebody else once in a while?” God’s faithfulness means reading the bible against ourselves. It means being cut into, changed.

It is often suggested that biblical chosenness is the problem in conflicts like the Middle East. This text shows how wrong that is. Look here.¹³ “Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . including the slave born in your house . . . and the one bought with your money.” We naturally worry about slavery here and that’s a good question, but set it to the side for a moment and notice this. You don’t have to be Jewish to be God’s people. Foreigners can join. So can slaves. Chosenness is not a matter of race or ethnicity or nation. It is a matter of being willing to follow this demanding God. And look further! Abram offers Ishmael instead of having a child at 99. As a 40 year old I can see this, I don’t want to fool with babies, how much less would my grandfather if he were living?! No thanks on the miracle God, I got a kid already. God says this back,¹⁴ “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son . . . As for Ishmael, I have heard you, I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous . . . I will make him a great nation.” You know who Ishmael is. Islam. A people with whom Israel is always wrestling. God doesn’t dish out condemnation here God says I’ll bless them too and make them great. Israel is my chosen but Ishmael deserves a blessing. Do you see the gentleness of biblical faith? Being chosen is great. Until it’s demanding. Until your enemies get blessed. Where do you think Jesus got all his stuff on loving enemies? From right here in the bible! That’s the problem with getting chosen by God. Because this God loves and blesses his enemies. You sure you want that?

Third and finally today, God’s faithfulness means being changed. God comes to a man named Abram and by the end of the conversation the man has a different name, Abraham. And a date with a scalpel. When monks and nuns join religious orders they get a new name—a friend of mine went from Rodrigo, which his mama called him, to Isaac Augustine, a biblical and churchly name. Thinking about native Americans the first one was canonized as a Catholic saint this year, Kateri Tekakwitha. There have been countless saints before unrecognized of course. When we baptize here we don’t use the person’s last name. That doesn’t matter. The only name that matters that day is Christian.

⁹Gen. 17:1

¹⁰ On screen too plz

¹¹ Deut 10:16 on screen plz

¹² Jeremiah 4:4 on screen

¹³ Gen 17:12-13 as quoted

¹⁴ Gen 17:18 & 20 as quoted on screen plz

And that's not the least thing changed about him. Nor is his circumcision. God wants Abraham blameless, upright, perfect. Cutting away flesh is a sign for cutting away something to leave something else. So it's a good image for giving up things that make for death, leaving things that make for life. In the New Testament Paul makes clear circumcision is not required for salvation. Israel's work to birth Christ into the world is complete,¹⁵ so "if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you." But elsewhere Paul uses it as an image.¹⁶ "In Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily . . . in him you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ, when you were buried with him in baptism." This begs the question. What do we need to be shed of that will feel like cutting away flesh, but will actually make for new life? For someone used to lust, looking away can feel like a knife. For someone used to arrogance being humble is like a blade without anesthesia. For someone who never says "sorry, I was wrong," apologizing is searing pain in a soft place. For anyone complacent with their status who feels like 'yeah God thinks I'm best,' being told to be holy by loving enemies can feel like being dead and buried. Wouldn't Abram have preferred the name change without the knife?

And Abraham laughs. Did you notice?¹⁷ "Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?'" No, of course not. Not without God. But a God who whirled the universe into existence can probably cook something up in Sarah's womb. Some of you tell me you're done with children. Some of you who are quite old say it. I say careful what you say. Have your *read* the bible? A neighbor said recently the surgeon said he's done. "So if you see the surgeon's office on fire you know we're pregnant again." God delights in growing things in deserts, springing up new life in wastelands, making 100 year olds new parents, making infants into wise ones, making you and me into saints.

Friend of mine is a pastor in St. Louis. His new church accused him of being legalistic. Condemning too much stuff. He didn't understand, he believes in grace. Until he listened to his predecessors' sermons. They had two claims in them: God is good, and we are forgiven. Good. But what about the third part? We're called to be holy. He preached a series of sermons arguing that life with God is a waltz, not a two-step. I told him this was very Methodist of him. Life with Jesus says God is good, we are forgiven, *now go and be holy*. And without that third part something is missing.ⁱⁱ

The dance image suggests that laughter may be the best sign of God's presence. It's really hard to dance without smiling. And God is always working wonders. Being weird and delightful. Being faithful to one undeserving people, Israel, and then to countless undeserving people, us. And surprising us with his ways of being faithful. You sure you want a relationship with this God? He wants one with you. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann argues for this three-part promise of God to Abram: his covenant includes numerous descendants, royal promises, and eternal ones.

ⁱⁱ It's Zach Eswine's story.

¹⁵ Gal 5:2 on screen plz

¹⁶ Col 2:11-12

¹⁷ Gen 17:17