



Negev Desert, courtesy of "Unsplash"

February 25, 2024

Genesis 17:1-9

A Covenant in Land

*Prayer: Author of life and sculpture of souls, we give thanks for your word in Holy Scripture. In your promise we have hope, in your covenant we live and move and have our being. May the words of my mouth...*

Land disputes are common. In the house I grew up in Oregon, my parents knew when they bought our home that the neighbor's garage had been "accidentally" built over our property line by about 3 inches, not accounting for the required set back of a foot or more. They were on good terms with the neighbor, and they acknowledged it, but my parents did not want to inconvenience them by asking them to tear down and rebuild their garage. Several decades later the neighbor's house had been bought and sold several times over, a new owner began to build on top of the garage, very close, cutting off sunlight to our house from the South. A dispute arose. A dispute which went on for years, and only stalled when the neighbor died – natural causes, for the record. My mother lived in that house for 34 years, today, the neighbor's garage is still where it was, with a second and third floor now, the current owners of both houses are still dealing with that dispute, 60 years after my parents bought that house. Maddening. It felt personal, it felt unjust; and the legacy of that albeit small dispute, continues to this day.

Last week I said as we began Lent, we will reflect on Covenants in worship. I said that God's covenants tend to be hidden in plain sight in things like water, light, air, land, sabbath, bread, the cross and of course in the human soul.

Parallel to the covenant with Noah, written in water, there is a Covenant that is promised to Abraham written in the land. There is also an open question about when any part of humanity will take it seriously.

So in Genesis the promise is to Abraham, that he will be the father of a multitude of nations. And that continues to this day: Jews, Muslims, and Christians all are part of the “Abrahamic faiths.” Jews tracing their ancestry back to Abrahams’s sons Isaac whom he had with Sara, Muslims tracing back to Abraham’s son Ishmael whom he had with Sara’s enslaved maid Hagar. Christians tracing back through the invitation of Jesus to be part of God’s covenant people, Jesus’ ancestry in Matthew 1 contains Abraham as his ancestor. This passage emphasizes the multitude of nations which will call Abraham their ancestor. And the covenant culminates in verse 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.”*

And God asks Abraham and his offspring after him to keep God’s covenant. In a word, in the sweep of history, we can say with confidence that living according to Biblical principles about land ownership -- has simply never been tried. Leviticus 25 describes how the land is to be cultivated sustainably, allowed to rest for one year in seven. After 49 years, the land is to be liberated from ownership, and people are to return in that year to the land where they are from. So, all sales of land only last a maximum of 49 years. In Leviticus 25 God says:

*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.<sup>i</sup>*

Abraham never owned the land of Canaan, although he lived there. The only land he purchased in it was for Sarah’s gravesite. <sup>[OBJ]</sup> It is the first commercial transaction mentioned in the Bible. 50 years later, he was buried next to her in what is now known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. It contains the remains of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah. A Byzantine church was built on the site, in the 12 century a Mosque; it was seized in the Six Days War of 1967 by the State of Israel, after which the mosque was divided, and half repurposed as a Synagogue. The control and ownership of the space continues to be disputed. In 1994 an Israeli Settler entered the Mosque during Ramadan and opened fire on the worshippers, killing 29 people, and injuring over 125. A legacy of bitterness and conflict continues. When we visited Hebron, it was a case study in Apartheid conditions. But that is another sermon entirely.

What the Bible records when the children of Israel arrive in Canaan, is not that God gave them the land, but that they took it by force. Understanding that it was promised to them. I was surprised to learn while we were in Israel and Palestine last year that they consider their land to be in the fertile crescent. The cradle of civilization. That is not the geography I learned in school, but it is their geography. It is a land that has a heritage of many nomadic-tribal/pastoral groups of people which the Bible lumps together and calls Canaanites. Meaning the other people that lived there. And friends, there is a legacy in this place of disputes about whose land it is, but what has simmered on a back burner has now boiled over into a humanitarian catastrophe.

Land covenants and disputes are everywhere. In peaceful countries they are between neighbors like what happened at my parents’ house, at national levels they are settled by wars like what is happening between Russia and Ukraine. Or are they? Legacies of land disputes get passed from one generation to the next. When I was growing up one of my close friends in High School claimed his

heritage was Prussian. No matter how hard we pushed him – do you mean German, Polish, Russian? His family identity was Prussian. A place that has not existed on a map since 1918.

What can we do? We can use the laws we have, if they help. We also may need to use other means, and by that, I mean education, organizing, de-escalation, compassion, and listening.

Black History Month gives us an excuse to turn our attention to a history not from the majority viewpoint. In recent years I have reconsidered the value of some of the things about my life which from my earliest days I took for granted. Almost everyone in my family had arrived in this country by 1730, so my people lived here during the time of slavery. My family came here to avoid religious persecution in Germany. They were part of what we call the Pennsylvania Dutch heritage and were not enslavers. My people were not wealthy, but they were not poor either. My family ancestors could marry legally, purchase and own small farms, for generations they kept vegetable gardens, a few chickens, hogs and cattle to feed their families, they raised crops and sold them. They valued education and also had professions. They fully understood that the enslaved people living around them in Virginia were denied these basic opportunities which they had: opportunities which stabilize families and allow for a modicum of dignity. They agitated for freeing those enslaved – it was their cause.

One of the things I miscalculated entirely was that because they were abolitionists, had addressed the issues in their day, and had won the change of laws, that their work is done. It is not. There continues to be a legacy of trauma for families who were denied basic human rights for generations. *Of course*. And addressing this trauma, helping to create a culture where people can stabilize following trauma is too large a problem for any one of us, but it is absolutely one of the things we can do together.

This month I finished reading *The Other Side of Prospect* by Nicholas Dawidoff which was published last year. He follows the story of a community of people in the Newhallville neighborhood in New Haven, whose families largely migrated there from South Carolina to work at the Winchester factory. The story follows a group of young people who grow up in the streets, after the factory has been closed, whose fathers and father figures are mostly missing from their lives, the role of drugs, poverty, and how an innocent boy of 17 confesses to a murder he did not commit. There's police corruption, substandard housing, lack of access to education and health care. The witnesses to the murder had good reasons for not telling the truth to the police.

In the New Testament Paul encourages early Christians to follow the laws of the land where they are living in various Roman provinces, unless those laws fundamentally conflict with Christian values. Generally, this means that Christians are encouraged to be kinder than they are required to be, humbler than circumstances strictly dictate, gentle in the face of brutality, to win others with love and kindness. In Galatians<sup>1</sup> he says:

*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.*

Paul urges the early believers to work to build one another up. And we know that those early churches contained a diversity of people: Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female.

Jesus instructed his followers to turn the other cheek when someone hits us. While this appears to be a humble, meek act, it is also an effective way to stop violence. Not to return it in kind. Jesus' life

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:22-23a

was all about interrupting legacies of trauma: curing the leper, healing the sick, forgiving those who sinned, and inviting them to live into that sweet time after their release from their suffering.

Looking back, the only thing I can think that could have solved my parent's land dispute, would have been for the neighbor, any of the neighbors who owned that house and who knew their garage was on our land, to have voluntarily torn it down and rebuilt it fully on their own property. That would have stopped the continuing problems with the property. My parents did not want to require it of them (it could have posed a hardship), but there was no other way to keep the injustice from being pushed down for future generations to deal with. They were a nice family. We got along well. But that proved not to matter later on. In retrospect, it almost looks like they conspired to leave problems for the future.

<sup>iii</sup>The challenge of our day is moving from growth mindsets to sustainability. From looking away from those who suffer when profits are made, to including and seeing all those who are part of the supply chain. Disrupting generational trauma is holy work. We began with a land acknowledgement today.

The rest of this sermon is for you to live out in your lives. Wherever you see injustice. Disrupting justice is slow work. Like building a garage, dismantling a garage, and rebuilding it, but it is ultimately a good legacy for those who come after. And the more we do this, the easier it gets.

The covenant with Abraham was that his descendants would live in peace. But shalom is not passive, it is something we work for every day, something we work on, something we value.

Friends, may you live in this peace.

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<sup>i</sup> Leviticus 25:23-24

<sup>ii</sup> This month in the Christian Century there is an article about *Repairing the Redlined Body of Christ*. A Pastor describes how his church in Evanston, Illinois moved to restore co-ownership to the African American church which originally left it to form their own black owned and black run institution. The two churches remain separate, but giving them co-ownership allows for them to have a voice, when their

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ancestors were invited to build and maintain a church they had no agency in leading.

He says that there were many vocal critics of the project it also was an opportunity to invite people into conversion. He says that "one of them told (him) that she realized that we are not 'giving away our church so much as we are sharing its future.'"