

One of my most prized possessions is right here on my keychain. It works just about anywhere in the world, so it's very valuable. I would not want to be without it. It worked when I lived in California, and it works here. What do you think it is? (Let them guess.) It's actually a barcode, which is my pass to get into the YMCA. This little plastic tag identifies me as a member, and as a member, I have privileges at any YMCA in the world. Now, how did this come about? The Y and the Hertensteins have a covenant. We pay them and they allow us to fully enjoy the benefits of membership. This tag marks me as belonging.

As believers, we are marked. That mark was instituted by God some 4,000 years ago with Abram. God asked Abram to assume the mark as a sign of faith and commitment. The mark meant that Abram would accept the covenant according to God's specifications.

This encounter with God would be a difficult struggle for Abram. He wasn't living out his faith yet, at least not in regard to the promise. Thirteen more years had passed since he and Sarai had taken matters into their own hands and Ishmael had been born. Abram was 99 years old now and Sarai was 89. Once again, God speaks to Abram and the message is clear and specific. "You will have a child through Sarai." This brought huge amounts of pain and tension for Abram. Let's hear the story. READ Gen 17: 1-6, 10, 15-22, 18:11-15; 17:26-27.

We are very familiar with the promises that had not come. Abram would be given land and many offspring. God changed their names to reflect these massive promises. This was hugely significant. At that time, names signified a person's role in life. For example, when kings assumed power, their names were changed to reflect their destiny. And, if a person did not have offspring, they were considered obliterated from the earth. This idea crossed cultures. Even the ancient Egyptians believed that if their names were repeated, they would be remembered and their eternal existence would be assured. So you can see the great hope of God changing Abram and Sarai's names. Yet, **the promise required an heir and there was none.**

So both Sarah and Abraham laughed. Many theologians point out that their faith was defective. I say the laughter reflected the pain and discouragement of the wait and all that the wait implied. In fact, I felt myself defending them to God. Twenty-three years! What was God thinking? Faith is just simply hard.

In those times barrenness was the worst thing that could happen to a person. Think of the thing you fear the most. I heard a woman say once she lived in fear of losing her husband, and then when she was 46, he died. Through that, she found that God was with her and as time passed, she lost her fear of the worst. A terrible thing happened in my life. The most devastating event in my life was the sudden death of my ex-husband. There is no more excruciating pain than having to tell your teenage children their father died tragically, and you cannot spare them massive pain. But God did not leave me; even when three months later I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Life is tough. It was not a walk in the park for Abraham and Sarah. Faith does not immunize us from tragedy. God had not left Abraham and Sarah for a minute. God went about helping them to get a grip on the pain, and to look forward to a bright, new future. **God set to the task of binding Abraham to him in radical faith.**

Do you think God might want to do the same for us? Because we struggle, don't we, living with one foot in the world thinking, how can this be, and the other foot in the door of faith, relying on God, but not always crossing the threshold, still clinging to what we can and want to do. But God said to Abram, *here's what I want you to do to enact this covenant of faith.*

When I use my little "covenant card" and go to the Y to work out, I hope for transformation. I want to get into shape. So I check out the classes. "Abs of Steel" sounds good. There's a picture on the wall and I do not resemble it at all, but the promise is that in a few short weeks, I will. Week after week, I am motivated by that picture. But as long as I just look at it, nothing is going to happen.

Abram and Sarai thought of themselves as barren and their future as closed. God needed to get their thinking turned around, so God began with a new self-image, reflected in a name change. "You are the Father of multitudes" "You are a princess," mother of nations. Self identity means a lot. What's your self-talk like? In your 4+4+4 this week, ask God for a new name. Read this passage of Scripture when you pray that prayer and see what God brings to your mind.

Don't miss the fact that these were 89 and 99-year-old people, It's never too late to begin living for God. When you begin to trust that you are someone God desires to bless and work transforming miracles in, it will make a difference everywhere, in all your relationships.

But it would be awhile before it would sink in for Abraham. He said, "Can't you just make this all happen through Ishmael?" Unable to trust he would rather rely on the one he can see; the son who is already there. So Ishmael is a threat to the promise. We too have threats against God's miracles, whenever we say, "No, God, I'd rather center my life around me."

Yet God willingly worked out God's plan within that framework of self-interest and lack of faith. God was not limited by Abraham's shortcomings.

Listen to the words of the anthem, a song sung to God: **"I set out on a narrow way many years ago. Hoping to find true love along the broken road. But I got lost a time or two, wiped my brow and kept pushing through. I couldn't see how every sign pointed straight to You."** Do you relate to that? I do. We step away from God at times. Abraham and Sarah did.

But God never abandoned that promise because Abram got off the path.

Instead, God said, "I am going to make my covenant between us and it will be a great blessing to you." So Abraham understood, even when he erred he could say to God, **"every long lost dream led me to where You are. Others who broke my heart, they were like northern stars, pointing me on my way into Your loving arms.** Abraham's broken road led him straight to God.

In trials and in our mistakes, no matter how devastating they may be, God's loving arms are never far away from us, and God works to lead us into a life of radical faith and blessing. Nothing is too hard for God.

Even if we think, it's too late for us to trust God for a new beginning. Did you hear it? The song, like Scripture says, **"But God just smiles and takes our hand. God's been there, because every child God has loved on earth has gotten off the path. God understands, because God has held us through it. It's all part of a grander plan that is coming true.**

When you have setbacks, disappointments, losses, little hope of a future, think transformed; live transformed. Tough times are part of a grander plan. Accept the fact that God has something brand new for you.

How did God move Abraham and Sarah forward? As long as you look back you cannot move forward. But it takes something to be a part of the covenant. It takes the second lesson in lordship, commitment; centering your life in God through Jesus Christ; walking by faith with a God who has much greater plans of blessing than we could ever accomplish.

Abraham was instructed to circumcise himself. He had to actively do something to mark him as a man of faith. Circumcision was the concrete sign that showed he accepted the covenant. Faith must not just be in our heads, it must be acted upon. **Circumcision meant serious, committed faith.** Thus the Bible says your heart must be circumcised.

Circumcision has been replaced now by baptism. Baptism signifies dying to self and rising to life in Christ. We don't order our own lives anymore. But we can get baptized, can't we, and nothing changes. So unless baptism is followed by commitment, it's just an institutional ritual.

This whole story is about binding ourselves to God in radical faith.

But the covenant would be through a child yet unborn. It doesn't fit into the normal scheme of life, in fact, it shatters the norm. It is radical. Faith is scandalous. It has nothing to do with what we can see or expect.

It's like a man in Hurricane Ike, a veteran of WWII and the Korean War. He had a shadowbox of medals and mementos from those wars. His house was ravaged by the storm and his Navy medals were gone. But three weeks later he received a call from two Texas A&M officials who just happened to be friends of his. They found his medals. The medals had washed out to sea, under the bridge to Pelican Island, and were found five miles away on the shores of A&M's maritime campus. The whole shadowbox, including its glass cover, was intact and the medals undamaged.

Here's the Lord's question: Is anything too hard for the Lord? It is an open question, one that waits for an answer. We must all answer it. How it is answered determines everything else. If the question is answered "Yes, some things are too hard; impossible for God," then God is not yet confessed as Lord. The church will be weak because we have decided to live limited by our own thinking and under our own control. We will never experience the joy of knowing God for who he is.

If we answer, "No, nothing is impossible for God," that is an answer which says we entrust everything fully to God and to no other. Abraham answered this way. because that very day, he

and all his household obeyed God and were circumcised. This story calls us to do the same, to make God central. You might ask, *Why in the world would I compromise my lifestyle for God and for the church?* We are called to make God Lord. Our calling is to speak to the world about living with, in, and for God. It is fulfilling, exciting, and a blessed life.

Will you make that commitment? If you do, this church will be wonderfully strong. It will be hard work, but you will be amazed at what God can do and how God will use you. It will feel really good and very hopeful. But it's up to you; it's in your hands. If you are willing, despite the broken road of the last few years, we will enjoy great blessing.

Amen