

The Mark of the Covenant
Genesis 17:9 – 14
Romans 4:9 – 12
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
May 22, 2016

One of the first buildings Lois Ann and I noticed on our 2014 Biblical Geography Study Tour was the Holy Land Tattoo Parlor. Several of the students traveling with us had tattooed on their wrists a small Celtic cross to commemorate their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I have watched the rise of the modern popularity of tattoos with some interest. A tattoo can have a variety of meanings. Some commemorate a life event, such as a pilgrimage. Some honor loved ones who have died. Folk who have spent time in prison may have jailhouse tattoos. A tattoo may indicate that you are a member of a secret society, or a criminal gang, or reflect hobbies and interests, or your business. The common theme seems to be that, for those who obtain them, modern tattoos reflect the story of their unfolding life. The events of a person's life are marked indelibly upon their body. A person declares his (or her) special relationships, spiritual values and life commitments in the tattoos etched on their person.

The practice of reflecting spiritual values through markings on our bodies is not new. In our passage from Genesis 17 we read last week of God's establishing his covenant with Abraham and – it is important to remember – with Abraham's descendants. The covenant is established between God and Abraham. Now, in verses 9 – 14, God instructs Abraham (and his descendants) that the covenant is marked by the practice of circumcising the male descendants of Abraham. Circumcision is a physical mark, the cutting away of the foreskin of the penis. Like a tattoo, God's covenant with Abraham is marked on the body of every male descendant of Abraham.

The natural question that arises at this point is simple: "Why?" What is God's intent and purpose in requiring this rite? Let us see what we can discern from these verses. First, we keep God's covenant by remembering it.

We keep God's covenant by remembering it

⁹ And 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.

Where is the proper place of God in our lives? How are we to be oriented toward the divine, toward spiritual reality? What do I have to do in order to be in a right relationship to God? I should note that, in phrasing these questions in this manner, I am doing so from a Jewish/Christian, a monotheistic, perspective. Most people in the ancient world were polytheists. They worshipped a variety of gods. For most people in the ancient world, the question would be, "What must I do to please the god Baal?" Or, "What must be done to obtain the favor of Aphrodite?" Or "Apollo?" Or "Zeus?" And, to please the ancient pagan gods often required some form of sacrifice. Possibly the most famous example of a required sacrifice to please a pagan god is when King

Agamemnon sacrifices his own daughter, Iphigenia, in order to obtain favorable winds so that his ships might sail and so begin the Trojan War. The pagan gods want tangible proof of your devotion to them.

Note carefully the contrast between what the pagan gods required and of what the God of the Bible requires of Abraham. What is required of Abraham is that he, and his descendants, remember the covenant. They show that they remember the covenant by circumcising their male children. In this way, they remember their covenant with God and to pass it on from generation to generation. They are **not** required to offer costly sacrifices or great labors. They are required to remember God and to pass the knowledge of God on from one generation to the next. The faith of Abraham is multi-generational. Each generation carries the covenant. It is reflected in procreation and perpetuation. Abraham's covenant endures. The duty is to keep it. Remember it. Follow it. And we can trace the continuance of God's covenant with Abraham through the centuries to the present day.

We keep God's covenant by remembering it. There is more to be said about the task of remembering the covenant. Part of remembering the covenant is recognizing that our children bear the marks of our spiritual influence.

Our children bear the marks of our spiritual influence

¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

Bearing a child is easy – well, at least from the husband's perspective 😊 ! But once the child is on the scene, the task of raising him (or her) to honorable, faithful, adulthood is challenging. These verses tell us that when a child arrives, a first obligation of believing parents is to mark the child as belonging to God. Under the Old Covenant, that mark was circumcision for male children. In our age, under the New Covenant, the mark is baptism, for both males and females. Traditionally, a child was not named until the eighth day. In this way a new born child was both named and marked as belonging to God at the same time.

And, note that the child **is not** making his own confession of faith or belief. This is not about the child making a "decision for God." The child is born into a believing family. For that reason, God has a special claim upon the child. The child is welcomed into a believing family and community. And the child is marked as a consequence of being born into a faith tradition. For the Jews, the mark was circumcision. The deeds of a parent are inscribed on the child. We are not born as self-defining individuals. We are born into a family, at a particular time and place, professing a specific faith (or lack thereof). We inherit a history. Parents make an impact upon their children spiritually, intentionally, or unintentionally.

I met a woman once who was adopted as a child. Her adoptive parents reasoned that since they did not know the spiritual background of their daughter's biological parents, (that therefore) they would not raise her with any spiritual or religious

instruction. This was serious parental failure on their part. My suspicion is that this was a reflection of spiritual laziness on their part: they did not wish to be bothered with providing a spiritual grounding to their adoptive daughter. Our children bear the mark of our influence. We do not think twice about teaching our children to play ball, or to read, or to be competent in basic math skills. Why would we think it is inappropriate to give our children a sound spiritual foundation to their life? This, by the way, is why such practices as circumcision and baptism, (and even baby dedications) are important. In doing these things the parents are publicly assuming the obligations of transmission of spiritual commitment to their child. I am pleased to say that in spite of her adoptive parent's failure, as an adult, this woman came to faith in Christ.

We keep the covenant by remembering it. In remembering the covenant our children in turn bear the marks of the covenant. We will influence them spiritually, one way or the other. Next, a father's first family duty is spiritual: introduce your household to the covenant.

A father's first family duty is spiritual: introduce your household to the covenant

¹²He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised.

God is giving these instructions to Abraham as the father, the head of his household. The instructions apply to all the males who are part of the household, naturally born children and to male slaves and servants. God is telling Abraham that he has the spiritual responsibility for those who are part of his household. It is Abraham's responsibility to see to it that the rite of circumcision is observed. God is entrusting Abraham with the spiritual duty that accompanies being the head of a household. It is an ongoing responsibility: Every male throughout your generations. The child and all his future descendants are dedicated to God and the covenant. A father has a spiritual responsibility to his household, especially his sons. A father's spiritual duties come first and they come early. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. It is the father's job to see to it that the covenant is observed, passed on from his generation to the next. The child bears the mark, but the obligation is the parent's, specifically the father's. Each father is to keep his family within the covenant.

Why is this particularly the father's duty? God is clearly giving husbands, fathers, an extra inducement to take parental responsibility seriously. Women naturally nurture, men do not. God says to Abraham, to husbands, to fathers, it is your task to introduce your family, your sons, to the ways of God. Raise your son in the light of the covenant. Continue faithfully toward God, generation to generation.

We keep the covenant by remembering it. In remembering the covenant our children in turn bear the marks of the covenant. We will influence them spiritually, one way or the other. A father's first family duty is spiritual: to introduce his household to the covenant. Next, God's claim upon us changes our understanding of male sexuality.

God's claim upon our lives changes our understanding of male sexuality

So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.

We need to take note that something very interesting is taking place in these instructions God is giving to Abraham regarding the mark of the covenant: circumcision. God is giving these instructions to Abraham in anticipation of the arrival of Isaac as the promised son of the covenant. God will fulfill his promise and, in about nine months, the ninety-year-old Sarah is going to give birth. But, remember that Abraham has another son, Ishmael, through his second wife, Hagar, Sarah's handmaid. Ishmael, at this point, is about thirteen years old. And that is significant. Why?

Many of the ancient near east peoples practiced the rite of circumcision. There is nothing particularly unique in the act of circumcision. The uniqueness of the Jewish practice of circumcision was in the timing. A Jewish baby boy was, and is, circumcised on the eighth day after birth. In that, the Jews were unique. The other ancient peoples who practiced circumcision did so at puberty. For these peoples, circumcision was part of the process of taking on manhood. The rite was associated with sexual maturity, of taking one's place in the company of men.

Abraham has two sons. One, Ishmael, is the child of human effort and intention. He is born as a consequence of Sarah giving her Egyptian maid Hagar to Abraham as a (lesser) wife. The other, Isaac, is born miraculously to Abraham and Sarah in her very old age. Both sons will be circumcised: Ishmael, near the time of puberty, as a sign of his entrance into the adult world; and Isaac, on the eighth day, as a sign that he is a child of promise, of the covenant initiated by God with Abraham. Israel's covenant with God begins a transformation in the understanding of male sexuality. By circumcising on the eighth day, the emphasis falls upon the celebration of the arrival of this child as the next generation in the line of the keepers of the covenant. The focus is upon father to father, through the generations. The new baby boy belongs to the line of Abraham; to the covenant kept through the years. He continues the spiritual chain of descent. In circumcising an eight-day old child the message is that the most important reality in this child's life is that he be initiated in the ways of God. As I said earlier, bearing a child is easy (at least for the man ☺); rearing him into honorable adulthood is challenging. In circumcising on the eighth day, the father remakes the son's masculinity, saying to his son: "You are marked by the covenant, orient your life around this spiritual reality." The son's first duty is not to make a great name; or to earn great wealth; or to win battles, fame or to rule over other men: a son's first duty is to remember God. In the bodily mark of circumcision, the son is reminded that he stands in a line that is traced back through the millenniums to father Abraham.

We keep the covenant by remembering it. In remembering the covenant our children in turn bear the marks of the covenant. We will influence our children spiritually, one way or the other. A father's first family duty is spiritual: to introduce his household to the covenant. In the act of circumcision, God's claim upon us changes our

understanding of male sexuality. A man's first duty is to remain faithful to the covenant. Next, spiritual commitments have life changing impact.

Spiritual commitments have life changing impact

¹⁴Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

There is an obvious play on words in this verse. To circumcise means to cut, remove, the foreskin of the male member. This is done as a sign of the covenant. Performing circumcision is keeping the covenant. A Jewish male who is not circumcised has broken the covenant with God. He is cut off from God and from God's people. He is no longer part of the covenantal promise. When the young shepherd, David, Jesse's son, is making his case to take his stand and challenge the Philistine Goliath, David says of himself: (1 Samuel 17:36) Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.” The reference to being “uncircumcised” is an insult. It indicates disdain.

James Michener's novel, **The Source**, tells the story of the Jews through the centuries of history. Under the Seleucid Empire the ancient Greeks ruled the land of Canaan. Michener tells the story of a young handsome Jewish boy attracted to the glory of the Greek Olympic games. Greek athletes compete naked. This athletically gifted Jewish young man submits to painful surgery to remove the mark of circumcision, so that he will look the same as the other competing athletes. The young man's father goes to the stadium to see his son compete. When he sees the result of the surgery the old man is grieved. His son has broken the covenant. The old man jumps into the arena and beats his son with his walking stick.

The temptation in the modern world is to believe that unseen things do not matter. I believe that it is precisely the opposite. It is the unseen things that matter most.

To that end, we keep the covenant by remembering it. Our children in turn bear the marks of the covenant. We will influence our children spiritually, one way or the other. A father's first family duty is spiritual: to introduce his household to the covenant. God's claim upon us changes our understanding of male sexuality: a man's first duty is to remain faithful to the covenant. Spiritual commitments have life changing impact upon us. Lastly, like Abraham, we are called to believe God and be saved.

Like Abraham, we are called to believe God and be saved

¹⁰How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

We have been looking at the place of circumcision as the sign of the covenant established by God with Abraham and his descendants. We have traced some of the lines of spiritual impact that this sign had upon the Jewish people through the ages. In this regard, circumcision plays an important role in the unfolding story of salvation as God has revealed it. That said, with the arrival of the New Covenant the place and

understanding of the meaning and significance of circumcision changed significantly. In his letter to the Romans, chapters 2, 3, and 4, we find Paul exploring these changes in depth. I encourage you to read these chapters on your own; though now I am only going to point to one facet of Paul's argument. Paul asks the question, "How essential is circumcision to salvation?" "To be saved, is it required that a male believer be circumcised?"

Paul answers his question by looking at the passage we explored a few weeks back, Genesis 15:6 And [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. Abraham believed God. It was counted to him as righteousness. Abram is saved as a consequence of his faith and belief in the promise of God given to him. The sequence becomes very important to the Apostle Paul. Which came first: faith or circumcision? Faith came first. The declaration of Abram's salvation is made in Genesis 15, approximately thirteen years before the introduction of circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Paul writes in Romans 4:10 How then was [salvation] counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. This sequence confirms for Paul the primacy of faith, belief and trust. Circumcision had (and has) value, but the really important thing is to take God at his word, to believe and trust in God.

Close

Where are you in your relationship to God this day?

Are you keeping the covenant? Do you remember God and seek to live your life before him? Have you raised your children remembering your first spiritual duty as mom or dad is to introduce your household to the covenant? Ours is not the covenant of circumcision; that has been eclipsed and surpassed in the person and work of Jesus Christ the Lord. The object of our faith is God the Father, as he has been revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ. Our spiritual commitments are unseen realities, but they have tremendous impact upon us and those whom we love.

Have you taken the step? Have you made the commitment? Have you turned to Jesus Christ in faith and asked him to be your savior?

Do so today.

Say "Amen!" Somebody!

Genesis 17:9 – 14

⁹ And 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 be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely 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.”

Romans 4:9 - 12

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.