

“Put it in Writing: Abraham”

Reading: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

We live in an age when integrity is merely a bonus. There are sports stars who commit violent crimes, but then we give them millions of dollars to let us watch them play their game. There are political leaders who make us promise after promise, while they regularly break their marriage vows on the side, or they make policies affecting our nation and our world while taking massive donations from businesses or interest groups that have a stake in those policies. And, in the interest of fairness, I should probably also mention religious leaders who, if one day discovered, involve themselves in financial schemes or illicit affairs. Integrity is merely a bonus; as long as you can get the job done, who really cares what you do on the side? Nobody's perfect, after all, and besides, I didn't ask to be a role model, as they sometimes say. Integrity is a bonus: nice if you can get it, but only occasionally needed for the task at hand. Of course that's almost surely been the case for a long, long time and in most cultures across the world. Corrupt politicians and vulgar celebrities are hardly new. But in our culture of instant communication and always-on news, it seems like there are so many breaches of integrity, and then they're quickly forgotten as we move on to the next story.

Of course some would argue that it doesn't really matter, in the end. Those hypocritical politicians are right: as long as you can run a country safely and efficiently, and as long as you're not doing anything illegal or harmful to others, why should I care what you do with your private life? Do outdated ideas of morality really make any difference, after all? But in the church, and especially in our holiness tradition that has long emphasized the transformation that Christ can bring to our lives, we see people as whole creations. Integrity matters because you are not one person in one setting and a different person in another. What you do in private has an impact on what you do in public. Decisions in the little things make a difference in the big things. Our world particularly cares about what you *do*, and especially what you do in the settings we care about. In the church, though, our concern is who you *are*, and your being is decided by all of your decisions.

And so integrity matters. You notice it when you see it. When a person's inside and outside are in alignment, it's worth noticing, because it's rare. When a person's work life and home life are in alignment, it's worth noticing. When someone's words and actions and, as far as we can tell, their thoughts all line up with one another, we notice. When someone does what they say they'll do, and especially when it costs them, we notice. Integrity may be a bonus in our world, but we sure are longing for it.

As is so often the case, we have trouble with balance. Our culture cares so much about what you do — you play football so well, you can get elected, you can build a church of thousands — that we don't care as much about who you are. The opposite might be someone who cares so much about who they are inside that they don't think it matters what they do. I know I'm a good person inside, so it doesn't matter if I lie or cheat. We've gone back and forth in the church, too: at times we have focused on the externals so much that what you are in your soul gets ignored so long as you look and act like what we think you should. Others have insisted that as long as you're right with God and you don't feel convicted about anything, then what you do on the outside doesn't really matter.

It's been a struggle throughout the last two millennia. If Christ has broken the power of sin, then what does it matter what we do on the outside? Can't we just get forgiven again and again? Or on the other hand, since so many of God's commands have to do with our actions and our externals, can't we just judge one another based on what we see on the outside? There were debates among the first generation of Christians, and there are still debates today among the latest generation of Christians. But no, what we hold to is that God made us a whole people: we are called to *be* new people in Christ, and being involves both the inside and the outside.

Part of the confusion probably comes from these covenants we're talking about during Lent. As we spend these next several weeks preparing for the celebration of Holy Week and Easter, our Scripture passages are focused on some of the covenants God has made with His people through the ages. These covenants often come with external signs, things that the parties in the covenant can look at and remember the commitments they have made in the covenant. And so the mistake we can sometimes make is to assume that since God seems to care so much about these external things, these signs of the covenants and the actions involved in keeping the covenants, then therefore these external things must really matter. Besides, how else are we supposed to be able to tell where other people are in their walks with God? I can't see inside your heart, but I can see what you do.

And it is true that these covenants reveal much about the heart of God. A covenant is a deeply binding promise. It's not something you enter into lightly, and it's certainly not something you break without serious consequences. So when God takes the step of putting His commitments and His promises in writing for all generations to see, it's worth taking notice. These covenants show us what God is doing, what God values, what God thinks needs to change, and what steps God is taking to redeem His creation. So this year for Lent, we're looking at what God has put in writing for us, and what we may need to put in writing in return. What commitments do we need to make in preparation for Easter based on what we're seeing about the heart of God.

Last week we looked at the covenant God made with Noah and with all of creation following the flood, and we saw that God was declaring for all to see that He is good even in times of catastrophe. This week we're moving on to the next section of the book of Genesis, which tells the story of Abraham. God makes a couple of different covenants with Abraham, but the one we read for today pretty well sums them up: Abram and Sarai will be the parents of many nations, and God will pour out His blessings on His creation through them. God gives them new names — Abraham and Sarah — new identities as participants in this covenant with God and as patriarch and matriarch of a new family of God's promise. The part of this covenant that we skipped over in our reading details how the sign of God's promise is circumcision: the men of this promised family would bear on their bodies a physical sign of identification with God's covenant. For generations to come, circumcision would mark the men of this family as belonging to God.

One of the things that we learn from this covenant is that God is intimately involved in His creation. That's something we might take for granted, but we shouldn't. Like we talked about last Sunday, many of the gods people worshipped in that culture were capricious and vindictive. Many didn't really care about humans or the rest of the world. Many were really pretty selfish. Even today, many people think of God as being up there in heaven somewhere, distant and not particularly interested in what's going on down here. And of course we know more of the story; we know about Jesus. But here, in this moment with Abraham and Sarah, God is taking the first steps in a grand plan

of salvation and redemption. Here He is planting the seed in this one old couple that will grow into a massive family that will give rise to the Messiah that will pour out His Spirit on the church that will include all nations and will embrace you and me. Yes, this is an ancient covenant full of ancient cultural ideas, and yes, it seems so far removed from us today, but here we see God reaching out and embracing His beloved creation. He is intimately involved.

And more than that, He is intimately involved in our whole being. This is a covenant that gives Abraham and Sarah a new identity, that changes them inside and out, and that serves as a model for all those generations yet to come.

You see, in the early days of the church this covenant became the basis for excluding some people from the blessings of God. When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome, some of the Jews who had come to Christ were insisting that Gentiles must first be circumcised and obey the Jewish food laws. In order to enter the covenant sealed by Christ, in other words, they must first enter all the other covenants God had made with His people previously. They were too focused on the external signs of God's promises. Paul was writing, in part, to explain to them that what mattered was not the external sign of circumcision, but the internal reality of Abraham's trust in God. That internal reality can persist with or without the external sign. "The promise comes by faith," Paul tells them. Abraham trusted God; he trusted God's faithfulness and power to give him an heir who would give rise to nations of blessing. Without that quality of trusting what God says, all the external signs of holiness in the world mean nothing. And *with* that trust in God, the blessing of being included in God's family comes with or without the external reminder of the promise.

So we see through this covenant that God is intimately involved in the work of saving His creation, and He does so by creating a people who are marked by faith. How long did God search through humanity until He found Abram, a man capable of the faith God wanted, and who could serve as the beginning of a new people marked by that faith? That willingness to reject the selfish desire to reject God's authority and instead trust in His words is the beginning of undoing the damage wrought by the fall of humanity. That faith opens the door to the outpouring of God's grace in our lives. It's a faith that marks us deeply. The external sign of that faith is no longer circumcision, it is bearing fruit for God's kingdom. It is being a Christlike person both inside and out.

This covenant with Abraham shows us that God has put in writing His commitment to be involved in our lives. It shows His commitment to calling us to lives of faith in His word, so that we can receive the blessing of being included in His promises. It shows us the call to be marked people of God, not marked with the physical sign of circumcision, but marked by lives of integrity, so that our actions line up with the faith we claim. So the challenge for us today is to ask God what we need to put in writing in response. Where is your faith not lining up with your actions? Where are you resisting the work of God in your whole being? Where is your faith not where it should be, or where are your actions not living out your faith? Or maybe you're in the place of the people Paul was writing to in Romans, and you're judging a brother or sister in Christ because they aren't responding like you think they should, and you need to repent of your judgmental spirit. God has covenanted with us: respond in faith.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)