

## Unquestionable Identity

Genesis 17:1-17, 23-27

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APCE # 2

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” <sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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.”

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

<sup>15</sup>God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup>I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

<sup>23</sup>Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. <sup>24</sup>Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>25</sup>And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>26</sup>That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; <sup>27</sup>and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

On one of his annual joke shows, humorist Garrison Keillor said he had a religious joke of questionable taste. Actually I don’t think his taste is questionable at all. Goes like this:

Once upon a time, a man passed by a storefront in a small European town. The show window was filled with many clocks. They were elaborate, quite beautiful, and exquisitely handmade. So he stepped into the shop.

Behind the counter, there was a Jewish rabbi. The man said, “I’d like to buy a clock.” The rabbi said, “This shop doesn’t sell clocks. I’m a rabbi, and I perform circumcisions.”

The man said, “If you perform circumcisions, why are there clocks in the window?”

And the rabbi said, “So what do you think I should display in the window?”

Around the church, I am sure there are some who think it’s of questionable taste to mention circumcision, much less joke about it. And they have plenty of good reasons.

Whenever this text is read, usually in Lent, people skip all that circumcision stuff in verses 9 through 14. We can probably guess why the lectionary committee circumcises the text. It could be embarrassing or even risky. Maybe the text makes church people nervous: the stuffy folks start blushing or coughing, the youth group starts giggling, and parents are worrying about how to explain this to their children.

There are reasons why we don’t want to put this text in the window. This is a Bible text for men, and men only. In our inclusive age, it sounds exclusive. You can get the clear impression from the text that faith is only passed along only to the men, that women aren’t included. Maybe that’s one reason why the practice of

circumcision gets spiritualized a little later in the Bible. The specific action is broadened into a spiritual idea. It's enlarged from a practice to a principle. It happens by the tenth chapter of Deuteronomy, as Moses says, "Circumcise your hearts and do not be stubborn any longer (10:16)." The verse applies to people of every gender.

There is, of course, another reason why we don't want to put this story in our window, especially a church window. This is a Jewish story, about a Jewish covenant – and we are Christian. For nineteen hundred and fifty years, many Christians have worked hard to distinguish themselves from the Jews. It was happening in Turkey in the middle of the first century in an area called Galatia. As the Christian movement spread westward, some Christians insisted that the uncircumcised pagans had to become Jews before they could become Christian – that they had to be circumcised before they were baptized. The apostle Paul said, "That's stupid." He wrote an angry letter to those people and said, "Who bewitched you? Christian faith is about freedom."

Well, you can guess what happened. Once that letter was printed in a Bible, a lot of Christians have said the Jewish covenant places no demands on us. One early Christian took an Exacto knife and cut all the Jewish references out of his Bible – kind of a circumcised Bible, if you will. To the church's dismay, there wasn't a whole lot left. So the church decided to keep the Jewish material in its Bible, for the Christian church comes from the Jews, as Jesus comes from Abraham.

So I'm wondering what to say about all this. Some of you are probably wondering what I'm going to say. The church staff went looking for a few circumcision hymns for worship today; for better or worse, we didn't find anything to put in the window. But today we are reminded of what lies at the heart of this ancient practice.

God said, "This is my covenant, for you and those who come after you." And God cuts this covenant, not only with the Jewish males (on whom it is physically possible), but also on the slaves and servants and resident outsiders in Abraham's house. It is more inclusive than we thought, beginning with one household and extending beyond. At the time, the practice of circumcision had probably been around for a while as a health practice; but when Abram is commanded, it is accompanied with a blessing from God.

"No longer will your name be Abram, which means 'father.' Now your name will be Abraham, which means 'big daddy of an enormous multitude.'" Old Abraham, ninety-nine years old and dry as an old dead stump, is going to have offspring through a surgically altered... well, you know... This isn't my story; this is God's story. And this is exactly what God did! No wonder Abraham laughed and Sarah laughed. Either it was too sad to be true, or too impossible to comprehend. God gave them a child anyway, a child named "Isaac," the Jewish word for Laughter.

So what are we going to say about all this, especially the circumcision stuff? We could say a lot. What the Jews say is the same thing we say about baptism: that this is where we are marked and claimed as the children of God. In the words of Jacob Neusner, the great Jewish scholar, 'A minor surgical rite of dubious medical value becomes the mark of the renewal of the agreement between God and Israel...It is meant to accomplish a specific goal: to secure a place for the child, a blessing for the child.'<sup>1</sup>

It's not just the action, says Rabbi Neusner. It includes the words that surround the action. Jews surround their actions with a lot of words. A table blessing turns a meal into a gift. At death, the prayer of *kaddish* announces God is holy and the Messiah is coming. And at a circumcision, a minimum of ten Jewish men gather around a male child on the eighth day of life, and they verbally bless this child into the covenant that God has made with Israel. Like baptism, it is a sign that is both deeply personal and profoundly communal. You belong to the God who brought you out of slavery in Egypt. You belong to the God who promised Abe and Sarah that

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Enchantments of Judaism: Rites of Transformation From Birth Through Death* (New York: Basic Books, 1987)

they would flourish parents even though they were well into their nineties. Through this outward sign and the words that go with it, you belong to God. And the story of your belonging is marked in your skin.

Tom Beaudoin is a thirty-something theologian up on Boston. He has studied young adults and body piercings. Tom is part of a whole generation of Americans who are getting their belly buttons pierced. A few years back, when he was getting a doctorate in theology, he started asking, “What’s all of this about?” What’s going on theologically?

A lot of young adults, he discovered, don’t feel like the world has much of a future. Or they feel alienated from the power structures and this is their way of marking it. Or they feel that institutions like the church, that meant so much to their parents and grandparents, haven’t provided a deep experience that has shaped for them. Listen to what he says:

We are a generation willing to have experience, to be profoundly marked, even cut, when religious institutions have not given us those opportunities. It could even be said that our indulgence in tattoos mocks the hyper-commercial world in which we live; tattooing is the only way we have control over “branding” ourselves, instead of being name-branded to death.<sup>2</sup>

Here’s the thing about circumcision: once it’s done, it cannot be undone. It is a continuing reminder of who you are. It was done before the child can say no. As I think about it, that might be the most important insight of all.

I have friends who grew up during the sixties. They were raised to question every other authority. So when they married and had children, they decided to give their kids a choice about whether they or not wanted to go to church. They let the kids sleep in until they were sixteen, and then took them to church. They had never sung with other people, or prayed with other people, or listened to about the scripture, or even sit and be quiet for any longer than ten seconds. So guess what the kids decided?

As my daughters will tell you, they have no choice about what they’re doing on a Sunday morning. It’s only fair; nobody gave me a choice, and I’m not going to give them a choice. That would be irresponsible. I chose for my children to be baptized in the name of the Trinity; it is my responsibility to make sure they know what that means. As they are shaped by scripture and the practices of the church, they will be shaped to make choices that honor the Lord Jesus Christ. To give them no guidance in how to live their lives would make me an unfit parent, to say nothing of putting them in potential danger,

So this is what the Jews do: they circumcise and say, “You belong to God.” Your story is God’s story. You were in Egypt, and God freed you from Pharaoh’s brick quota. You were wandering in the desert, and God gave you a teaching. We were in the Promised Land, and God gave you milk and honey, and all along the way, God said, “Don’t forget who you are.”

All of this brings us to the primary benefit of circumcision, which is also the primary benefit of baptism. Whether circumcised or baptized, when we wake up in the morning, we don’t have to wonder who we are.

Your identity is given to you by a community that says, “You are God’s child.” You are given a story that is greater than your own stories of pain and despair and loneliness. Your life is enrolled in a story that is greater than some advertiser telling you what you should want or what you should buy or what you should consume.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) 77-78

That's why we always have to make the most of Christian baptism. That's why we root the Christian life in baptism – because that's the moment when the church says, “You belong to God, because we belong to God.”

Now, I know there are plenty who think otherwise. Even some Christians say, “We ought to let people choose. People need the freedom to sign up on their own.” Now, sure, God can raise up stones and make them into children of Abraham. But when God has children of Abraham right here, the Christian life is really a matter of choosing to become what God has already chosen. Our choices in life make sense only when they are rooted in God's choice of us. How are we ever going to know what to choose if the church doesn't tell us who we are?

So let me say it again: you are a child of God. God's story is your story. God chooses you to be part of that story.

- We didn't choose for Jesus to be born. That was God's decision. It was made for us.
- After Jesus appeared, the human race chose against him, and got rid of him. But God chose to raise Jesus from the dead, so Jesus can keep interfering with us until we know who we are.
- We didn't choose “church.” Church was God's idea. Church is God's experiment. God sends the Holy Spirit to fill, and inform, and commission. We didn't choose all of this; it was chosen for us.
- So what's the big deal if somebody chose for us to be baptized? If somebody else decided that we are to be included in the promises and purposes of God? Modern people want to believe that life is all about them: about their pleasures, and their entertainments, and their careers. But that's a lie. Life has its purpose only as God says, “You belong to me. My story is your story. My future is your future. My work is your work. You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to bear fruit.”

On the eighth day of life, God says, “You shall mark the Jewish child as a sign of the covenant.” It's the eighth day, I suppose, because that's the first day of a new creation. The covenant is God's new creation, by which we are shaped and given direction. It is God's announcement that we matter and have a purpose. It is God's blessing, given from one generation to the next, so that when our days are over, or if our days are still going on, we know that nothing separates us from God's steadfast love.

From this day forward, we belong to God. All of us. The word for the sure knowledge that we belong is covenant.

You know this, because you are Christian Educators.