

“A Family For All”

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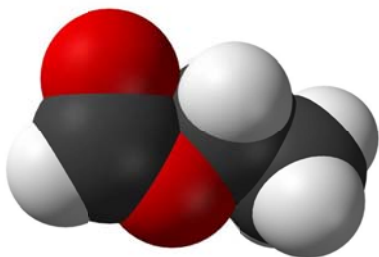
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Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 = God’s covenant with everyone everywhere

Have you ever caught the aroma of rum or tasted a raspberry? That characteristic flavor of raspberries and the scent of rum consists of a chemical known as ethyl formate, a rather common chemical here on Earth.



Surprisingly, as scientists analyze the information from radio telescopes, the whole of our galaxy smells and tastes a bit like that. Among the more than fifty molecules which have been identified in the dust of space, the most prominent is ethyl formate.



It is a wonderful sign of the symmetry of the universe that we are made of the same stuff as the stars. When we sample raspberries or smell rum, we taste and touch the stars ~ the very same rummy scented stars that



God showed to Abram. On that crystalized moment suspended in time, God made a deep and solemn promise to be our God and we to be God’s family, eternally and forever. This barren couple’s offspring would



outnumber all the stars in heaven.

After the fiasco in the Garden, after Cain’s murder of Abel, the flood and Noah’s Ark, the tower of Babel, God must have been extraordinarily frustrated with the arrogance and stupidity of us stubborn humans. God’s previous attempts to teach and guide us were simply not working. God wisely decided to try a new approach.



So God says in essence, “now for something completely different.” God tries something new, a covenant, a promise made with one couple, with no children not even a family ~ Abram and Sarai.



So God created a new relationship with this one vulnerable, marginalized couple with no prospects. God called them out from their home in Ur. They were nonpersons others would pity if they even noticed them at all ~ nobodies whom God chose to turn into somebodies, the progenitors of the largest tribe in history. This blessing of them brings multiple blessings to every living human.

Today, the vast majority of humans trace their spiritual heritage back to that covenant God made that night with Abram and Sarai. Not just Jews, but Muslims and Christians and others as well, all of us descendants of those nomadic Arameans from Ur of the Chaldees, all of us among God's covenant people.

Even more, God's covenant means God has created a family for all varieties of families. If a childless, elderly couple can become the parents of a vast family, then God blesses all kinds of families: not just a mommy and a daddy and 2.1 children, but grandparents raising grandchildren, and single parents, and families which adopt, and singles, and families with two moms or two dads, or mixed marriages, or a whole variety of non-traditional family patterns are still within God's covenant community and are most emphatically not to be excluded by us.

What did they have to lose? Nothing but their anonymity and ignobility. To demarcate their new estate, God gave new names to Sarai and Abram. They are now known forever as Sarah and Abraham. Their new names taken literally mean “parents of many nations.” They gained an unimaginable future.



This passage we read today, this way of God making a covenant with Abram and Sarai is unique in the Bible. However, this grisly ritual of passing through animals cut in half was common in the day, used by a sovereign in granting land to a vassal. The grant is free of any conditions. There are no stipulations as to any future action on the part of the grantee. It is truly a free gift, no strings attached.

The meaning of God passing through the halved animals is to state ritually: "May I, God, become like these animals if I fail to uphold this covenant." All the risk is on God's side ~ all the grace is on ours.

That's the kind of God who has chosen to be in relationship with us. A God who risks everything ~ a God in the business of giving everything away.

In that singular event forty centuries ago, this God of all gods enters a covenant of grace with us as well. Many misunderstand what God is offering, misconceive it as some kind of binding contract between God and us ~ we do things for God and God in turn does things for us. We worship God, give sacrifices to God, tithe and do good works and God in return will make us healthy, wealthy and happy.



But a covenant is not a contract. In a contract if one party fails to meet their obligation, it is abrogated, null and void. If I don't pay for that raspberry mojito, smelling like the stars, I don't get it. If Starbucks doesn't deliver that mocha chino latte, I don't have to pay for it. That's how a contract works.



Covenants while superficially similar are actually quite different. In the covenantal relationship God offers us, when we fail, as we often do, God remains faithful and gives us another chance. God's side of the bargain, God's promises are always secure. The old approaches having failed, God is trying something new here, a new approach with humanity ~ one that puts all the risk on God's side, willingly taken.

God only knows why were chosen the humble instead of the exalted, the weak instead of the strong, the vulnerable instead of the entitled. Maybe because they were the ones open to the promise, responsive to the offer, the ones who said "Yes" to the call ~ nothing to lose and everything to gain by taking God at God's word.



What did Abram and Sarai offer in return? Our

Scripture today reads:

"And Abram believed Adonai; and God reckoned it to him as righteousness."



God wishes us to do the same: to live out our faith, offering it to God so as to remain in covenantal relationship with God and one another.



Covenantal living means we work by consensus. Consensus is not mere voting, the tyranny of the majority over the minority. Nor is it the tyranny of the minority which, if even one person is opposed, it stands vetoed.

Rather, consensus means we stay in relationship with one another even when we disagree ~ most especially when we disagree. We don't storm off and breakup the relationship shouting blasphemies as we go. We don't threaten and disrespect. We remain in relationship even when, especially when, we would rather break the relationship off. We stay in relationship ~ that's covenant.

As God gives us chances to change and rethink, to repent, to seek and receive forgiveness, so we grant that same grace to one another. We commit ourselves to live in covenantal community, treating our neighbors as we wish to be treated ourselves ~ with fairness, respect, compassion and mutual forgiveness.

Covenant means that "The past week is gone ~ we cannot change it. Now in these moments we offer ourselves anew to the living God" ~ re-commitment, rededication, re-upping the covenant between us ~ every Sunday.

Covenant means God gifts us with "pardon for the past, power in the present and promise for the future." God's grace is so much sweeter than honey, better tasting than a raspberry mojito, more delicious than the taste of the stars.

Covenant means that God knows well that we will fail, and God is there to catch us and encourage us back to the path. Every morning of every day we can catch a glimpse of God's new age dawning with extraordinary possibilities for us to serve God, restored and revitalized, forgiven, loved and redeemed. That's a family for all kinds of families. That's grace. That's covenant.

