

“Let’s Make a Deal”

Genesis 17:1-8 and 15-19; Romans 4:16-25

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It may happen in a personnel office. “Dear God, if I can just get this job! I’ll work hard, I’ll be industrious, I’ll be different.”

Or, it may happen during a late winter ice storm. “Good God, if I just make it off these icy roads safely, I’ll not be foolish enough to dare the elements like this again.”

Come the ides of April and income tax time, it may sound like this: “O God, if I just don’t get audited this time, I swear I’ll never shade it that close again.”

There are so many ways and so many occasions when we try to make a deal with God. It seems to be an irrepressible instinct of human nature - at least of that part of humanity that believes, and for a surprising percentage of those who think they do not believe, too.

Sometimes we say, “If I . . .” but what we really mean is, “O God, if *you* . . .” Sometimes it is trivial. “O God, if I can just win the *Readers Digest* contest (or, the Pennsylvania Lottery) this year, I’ll give you your fair share - more than a tithe (calculated, of course, *after taxes*).” Or, “God, if I can just pass this test in organic chemistry, I promise I’ll apply myself from now on, and study harder.”

Sometimes it is not so trivial. “God, help me get the kids through these difficult stages so they’ll grow up and be mature and responsible.”

Sometimes it is intensely personal. “O God, if my spouse and I can just make it through this crisis . . .” We have tried to strike that deal so often we have formalized it into a jingle: “The family that prays together, stays together.”

Sometimes it takes on global dimensions. “God, if you’ll help our nation stand firm and unyielding in the face of intense international pressures and even aggression, we will give you more honor in our national life.”

Sometimes it takes on forms that are special to the occupation. “O Lord, if I can just get this sermon ready, I swear I’ll start working on next week’s sooner.”

It is what you might call the perspective of pious plea bargaining. “God, I don’t deserve it, but if you will relent on the consequences just a little, I’ll mend my ways, I promise.” It is the “Let’s Make a Deal” approach to our relationship with God. “God, I’m facing a tight situation, and I don’t know what I’m going to do. Let’s make a deal! You help me out of this jam and I’ll try to be a better, more faithful person.”

The ploy is at least as old as Abraham. He knew all about it. “Lord, if you’ll just help me get out of Egypt with my scalp intact, even if I have to compromise Sarah a little . . .” “God, if I can just settle this property dispute with my nephew, Lot, without it costing me *too much*.”

It is not because of his devious ways in Egypt that Abraham is remembered and honored after more than four thousand years. It is not because of the crafty financial arrangements Abraham made with Lot that St. Paul calls him “the father of us all.” Remember, Paul is talking not just about himself and his fellow Jews. He is writing to the Church at Rome. They are mostly Gentiles. There is hardly a drop of Jewish blood in them, so to speak.

When Paul names Abraham “the father of us all” to the likes of them - and us - he means Abraham is something like a *new Adam*! He is the father of humanity. Wheeling and dealing did not do that. Covenanting did that.

Wheeling and dealing is our ‘modus operandi,’ the way we like to get things done. Covenant is how God chooses to work.

There are several things we should note about this business of covenant making. For the covenant-making process discloses something fundamental about how God makes right what is wrong in our world, our lives, our relationships.

1) God takes the initiative. We do not have to attract God’s attention. We do not have to make God an offer God can’t refuse. We do not have to lure God with our irresistible, limited-time-offer deals.

It is God alone who establishes covenant. Often God makes a covenant at exceedingly unlikely times. Even when we are, figuratively, ninety-nine years old. Weary, used up, not feeling a bit spiritual.

2) God gives promises. God gave three promises to Abraham. First, he would be the father of many nations. That promise was ridiculous, humanly speaking, now that his years of vigor were past, now that he was old and senile and decrepit. Second, there would be a special relationship between God and Abraham and his descendants. That would be so in spite of the fact that Abraham had shown little evidence of previous piety. On the contrary, Abraham was more than a little startled when God spoke. Third, Abraham would possess the land of Canaan. This to one who had always been a nomad, who had nothing laid by, who had to negotiate an armistice with his own nephew in order to insure a little room for himself and his family.

An even more amazing feature to the whole story is that Abraham - two-faced, devious, crafty, reluctant Abraham - took God at his word. Abraham believed God. That is why he is “the father of us all.”

3) God gives a divine affirmation. “I will be God to you and to your descendants.” Of course, since God was the creator, God already was the premise for all existence. But God was affirming something more here. God was saying to Abraham, “I will be *for you* in a special way.”

4) God has a divine expectation. “You are to be faithful toward me. You are to keep my covenant. You are to walk before me and be blameless.”

Then in the story two things occur which show that God is realistic about those with whom God makes covenant. Those two things are a name change and the promise of Isaac:

The name change. “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. As for Sarai, your wife - Sarah shall be her name.” Linguistic technicians tell us there is really no difference in those name forms. They are simply variants of the same name. The author includes it in his account because of the symbolic value. New names signal transformation to a new reality. New names for Abraham and Sarah confirm their destiny under covenant with God. People become what they are named. So Abram becomes Abraham, and Cephas becomes Peter, and Saul becomes Paul. And each of us, in baptism, is called by name, to which frequently is attached the interpretive phrase, “child of the covenant.”

The promise of Isaac. The other strange thing which occurs as a consequence of the covenant is the promise of Isaac. Old, dried up, ninety-nine-year-old Abraham is to father a son by barren, ninety-year-old Sarah. “And Abraham fell on his face and

laughed” - with surprise, with incredulity, with self-ridicule - but also, with an irrepressible element of uncontrollable joy.

So should we laugh out loud when we consider the odds with which God has to contend. It is not just unlikely, it is ridiculous, even unbelievable. Except that there is Isaac. He is living proof that God gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that did not exist.

The God who brought death to life in the womb of Sarah and again, later, with the boy Isaac on Mount Moriah, is the same God who also brought Jesus to life from the dead, and who brings new life within the Christian community - into your life and mine.

God’s covenant determination to restore and redeem binds Abraham and Sarah to God, binds Paul and the Roman Christians, yes, and binds us to God in radical faith. And God delivers on God’s covenant promise to save, to restore, to love.

It is a better deal than you or I could ever imagine, much less cut on our own.