

September 10, 2017
Lesson 2: Circumcision
Scripture: Genesis 17:1-14

Context:

Today we read about a sign that is less awe-inspiring and ponderous to wonder about than the rainbow we read of last week. Today we look at circumcision, another one of the earliest forms of covenant between God and God's people.

Something that occurs as we look at these two different signs is the realization that the writer comes from different perspectives. While church tradition says that Moses is the one who wrote the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible including Genesis, there are stories that use different names for God. Scholastic research from the 1800s and forward points to the fact that there were probably several authors who helped piece these ancient writings together.

Today's scripture lesson focuses on contributions from the P tradition (P for priestly). The P tradition in the book of Genesis focuses on how rituals and code of conduct developed among the early Israelites. There is a focus on the promises found between God and God's people, the main theme of this chapter and particular passage.¹ In this passage the promise is focused upon the term covenant as the Israelites will be given something that seals their identity physically, gives belonging, and creates vocations for them.² For the ancient world, this would have been a physical marker in which the people knew to whom you belonged.

When God and Abraham have this conversation, this is the beginning of the relationship between God and the Israelites. Abraham is the one chosen to be the father of many nations and all the generations following him will be tied to Abraham. Circumcision helps to identify those who are the descendants. When the Israelites are circumcised, an announcement is being made that the Israelites belong only to that community of faith and only to God.³

Circumcision will be the distinguishing mark for the Israelites and we see its importance continue to develop throughout the Old Testament. If you are circumcised, you belong to El Shaddi, the God of the Israelites. Belonging to this God is not just about saying it in name or thinking about belonging to this community; it is a part of your physical being.

But circumcision did not just play a part in the early Israelite community; it was a part of the Christian church as well. The Pauline letters would mention the heart being circumcised and the person being whole.⁴ There are numerous scripture where we hear of

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1982), 153.

² Ibid. 154.

³ Ibid. 155.

⁴ Col. 2: 11-13; NRSV.

circumcision as a practice that helps to condition and heal people. The conversation around circumcision also brought up where did covenant carry on, and when did it move to a different meaning. Throughout the New Testament, we read of some very heated discussions where some believed that the Gentile believers had to be circumcised to enter into the Christian faith. Even though the discussion of circumcision would raise controversy in the early church, it invited the question of how we view covenant and thinking about the power of signs and symbols in our faith.

Application:

In the Christian church, we know about circumcision as we see it hold a theological framework for baptism. In baptism, the practice is an entrance into a new life, a new loyalty to a new community.⁵ Whenever a baptism occurs, new life begins in that person whether they are a newborn or an adult brought into the faith.

To a degree, one could say that even baptism is the new circumcision. God is with us as the waters touch our body and we are a new creation in God. It may not have the same physical component as circumcision, but it is still involves a covenant where we are reminded that God is with us.

As to where this passage applies to us today, we are reminded that our God is one who has chosen humanity, our very flesh to belong to God. We belong to God and in that we are promised that we are never forsaken. Generation after generation of Abraham's bloodline would be brought into the fold including farmers and kings, scoundrels and heroes. All of them were important to God and all were made in the image of God.

While talking about circumcision can make us uncomfortable and even blush a little, it reminds us that God has made and loved every part of our being. To the Israelites it was so important that they passed on this covenant tradition from generation to generation. To the writers of the New Testament it was so important that they discussed Jesus circumcising our hearts. To the early church it was important to discerning who was in and who was out of the fold. To us today, it reminds us that we are God's children and there is nothing we can do to escape that beautiful fact.

Respectfully,
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⁵ Brueggemann, *Interpretation*, 155.

