

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

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You sit on the floor of the music class with your toddler in your lap. Looking out across the room full of singing children and clapping parents, you realize, “I’m a dad.” It’s not a new revelation. Heavens, your child is three years old now. But in that room full of mothers and fathers the overwhelming sense of being a parent sits upon your psyche. It’s not something you picked up one morning at Target and tried on in the dressing room. Rather, it has grown, like another layer of skin, across your reality. I’m a parent. The truth of what that means settles upon your heart in all its fullness in that one moment - there in the busy, crowded room.

Or perhaps it was a time at a staff meeting, where the full gravity of the situation struck you. “I’m a doctor,” you think to yourself. How did *that* happen? Sure there were endless years of school and internships. Late nights and early mornings. Surely you had paid the physical dues required to be sitting at that table. But when did you finally and fully take on the mantle of being doctor? When was it so second nature to you that you no longer felt you had to fake it until you make it? “I’m a doctor,” you say to yourself and you are no longer speaking about a piece of yourself hanging out there on your shoulder - with you but not *of* you.

Identity. It’s a wily thing. Pieces of our identity creep up on us. The process of adopting identity is a slow evolution. We can often be taken by surprise when we eventually arrive at a place where we claim a new label for ourselves - parent, spouse, teacher, writer, musician.

In 21st century U.S. we spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about who we are, analyzing ourselves - our motivations, reactions, desires, hang-ups - but even so, we often find ourselves puzzled at how the process of identity formation has happened with us by its side. Identity formation is all about the patterns of our daily life and the affiliations we draw along the way.

And while it's true that the integration of a piece of our identity happens gradually, often it is initiated by a decision we make at some point. A decision to get pregnant or keep the pregnancy. A decision to go back to school, to take a particular job, to come out to family, to join a local organization. A conscious choice to move in a particular direction. The unfolding takes its own course, but the genesis is often in our hands.

My research in graduate school in the early 90's was to interview women who identified as both feminist and Christian. I explored the processes these women could point to in their lives that enabled them to claim both of these affiliations in a world that usually saw them as contradictory.

Feminists talked about having to "come out" as a Christian. Typically in my women's studies circles my colleagues couldn't understand how it was I could practice Christianity - a faith that

had historically caused systematic oppression of women, and many others as well. As we all well know.

And of course, in the early 90's feminist views, feminist theology, caused many in the church to stiffen their backs. They claimed tradition was at risk by taking on such "radical" notions of inclusive language and women's full participation in the church.

Most of these women I met and studied came into their adult life in the mid-1970's and negotiating these labels - feminist and Christian - these identities, was no easy task.

Many found their way alone, created a language, and forged identity through the maze of living misunderstood by many.

And yet every one of them told me in their own way that they would not change who that journey forged them into being. Each of them described that the process of working it out, exploring, experimenting, suffering and triumphing, all of it was life-giving in the end. Each of them described being called into that identity and called into that journey. To be fully who they were created to be, each woman recognized that it was the only way forward.

When he was 75 years old, a man named Abram was called by God from the land of Ur into unknown territory. He and his wife were promised a land and a people for their faithfulness.

And then, for a quarter of a century they struggle to understand and be faithful to where it is God is calling them.

Abram and Sarai, uproot their tribe and move. They encounter hardship. Abram asks Sarai to lie to and with the Pharaoh in order to protect their lives. Sarai asks Abram to lie with her maid in order to have some sort of offspring. Neither one of them perfect. Neither one of them able to comprehend what God's promises could possibly mean.

Two and a half decades into this adventure and they are still nomads in the desert and still childless. Perhaps they are a bit wiser. They certainly had entertained angels and been tested in the cauldron of life.

But would either of them have described themselves as a different people? It's hard to say.

But when God approaches them this third time, God once again promises a nation of people to come from their union. Abram laughs at the ridiculous notion. It's been 24 years, if something were going to happen it would have by now. But God hears Abram's laugh and knows. God knows that now is the time.

Their relationship had developed enough that Abram knew he could fully express himself before the Divine. And God knew that no matter what God said, Abram and Sarai would be

faithful. That freedom of expression, even while humbly bowed before God, was sign enough that the time was ripe. That Abram and Sarai's new identities had been firmly forged in the experiences of the previous 24 years.

And so - "No longer shall your name be Abram, but it shall be Abraham. No longer shall your wife be called Sarai, but you shall call her Sarah. You shall be the mother and father of the nations."

These new names seal the covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah. The covenant that has been 24 years in the making.

Sometimes it takes a long while for us to be shaped into something new. Sometimes God's work progresses at glacial speed. Sometime it doesn't even feel like God's work, but our work - left to us alone and somewhat forlorn.

But after 24 years Abram and Sarai had been practicing what it meant to follow this God of all gods. They had been tested and tried. They had failed and succeeded. Had answered the call over and over, even as they were learning what it meant to adopt this new identity as follower of God.

Friends, this story begs us to ask, how are we shaped by the covenant of God? By what name are we marked? And what is it that we are doing to integrate this mark into our identities.

Identity formation is all about the patterns of our daily life and the affiliations we draw along the way. So what are your daily routines? Who are your affiliations? What patterns are shaping you into this covenant with God?

Need I mention? Just after this story Abraham is commanded to be circumcised (along with all his male tribesmen). He is marked by a new name and his whole body is expected to be part of it.

Each of us here has made some sort of conscious choice. To be in relationship to God, to one another. To be shaped in this way. The genesis of it all we know was in our hands.

How is it now that our lives - heart, mind and *bodies* - are being marked by our covenants with God? How will people know we are in this game and mean it? How do *we* know we are in the game?

Abram and Sarai look to us and ask us what it is we are doing in our lives to integrate our commitment into our identities. So that we might truly have our skin in the game.

We are called to be in that process of working it out, exploring, experimenting. We are called to be forged by this journey of covenant - of being named and having our identity reshaped in the image of God.

God's covenant requires nothing less.

Amen.