

“Couldn’t We Just Wear T-shirts?”

Genesis 17

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Sermon

Genesis 17:1-11:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.”

That’s what religion is, right? A.) knowledge about God, and B.) some good deeds.

“And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.”

And Abraham pondered this for a moment and said unto the Lord, “Couldn’t we just wear t-shirts?”

Prayer

Father, this is strange to us, and I know it was strange to Abram. Remind us that the Biblical word for strange is *holy*. We’re terrified of the holy. So would you help us to trust you? I pray especially for those who have been abused sexually, by themselves or others. Guard their hearts and redeem the images in their minds and bodies. In the name of Jesus I bind every dark spirit associated with sexual sins, and I call on you, Holy Spirit, to fill us with yourself. In the name of Jesus and under the authority of His covenant blood I speak. Amen.

“Abraham, you shall cut off the foreskin on the end of your penis. This shall be a mark (a sign) of the covenant.” And Abraham said (or at least he must have thought), “Couldn’t we just wear t-shirts? Or have an altar call? How about classes, passing some exams, and getting a certificate? How about a fundraiser? Now *that* would be a sign. God, you can touch me anywhere, but please, not in that spot.”

Think about that spot...but not too long. It had been 24 years since God told Abraham that he’d make of him a great nation and a great people. And think about that spot. Faith and confidence are pretty important to the proper functioning of that spot. For Abraham, that spot was nothing

but failure and some disobedience involving Hagar and Ishmael. Do you get it? “God, touch me anywhere, but not there. It’s shameful, and it’s private.” And you may be thinking, “Yeah, Peter, it’s private. Let’s talk about something else.”

Did you know that circumcision is mentioned 73 times in the New Testament? I suspect that it’s the parts of Scripture that we modern, enlightened people ignore. It’s those parts that we need most. And it appears that our private parts aren’t meant to be private from God...hidden in fig leaves. As we learned in Genesis 2, our sexuality is holy.

So, “Abraham, you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. It shall be a sign.”

A sign?
To whom?

1. Other people? “Lift the tunic, look for a eunuch”? That’s part of it. A sign for other people, a sign to the nations.
2. Perhaps it was a sign to the man or boy who received it, a sign that spoke to him in just about every possible way: pain, pleasure, sorrow, delight, hopes, and dreams. “Abraham, this belongs to me. You belong to me. I am love. I am life. Life.” You know, God did just say, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful.” Anthropologists say that in some cultures, circumcision was a sign of fertility.
3. Not just a sign to the groom, but a sign to the bride...and maybe even a sign to God.

If you’d like a challenging text for your morning devotional time, try Exodus 4:24. God has just sent Moses to Egypt to say, “Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go or I will kill your firstborn sons.” Then in verse 24, at a lodging place on the way to Egypt, the Lord meets Moses and tries to kill him. Zipporah, Moses’ wife, grabs a flint and cuts off her son’s foreskin and touches it to Moses’ feet saying, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me.” And at that, Yahweh leaves Moses alone.

So when God saw the blood of circumcision, the blood of the firstborn on Moses, He passed over...like Passover when the Jews place the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. It was the sign of the covenant, a covenant in lamb’s blood. Moses is saved from the wrath of God by the circumcision of the firstborn son. What a concept! Then in verse 26, it was then that Zipporah said, “A bridegroom of blood,” because of the circumcision. “A bridegroom of blood to me.”

You see, Moses was protected, and so was his bride, by circumcision. In that culture, women were never circumcised, and yet they were. For in Biblical culture, each woman was “covered” by a relative (if she was single) or by her husband (if she was married). She was circumcised through communion with her circumcised husband—the bridegroom of blood.

That’s weird and pretty wild, huh? The covenant of circumcision. God says it’s a sign, and yet it’s also the thing signified. Theologians call that a sacrament. It’s a sacrament of the covenant in Abraham’s flesh.

By why?
And what for?

You know, God doesn't really tell Abraham. Abraham doesn't know about the covenant...like knowledge he could take from some tree. And yet Abraham will *know* the covenant with every nerve ending in his body, life, and heart.

Couldn't we just wear t-shirts?
"You will be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins."

Genesis 17:12-13:

"He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant."

God tells Abraham to circumcise on the eighth day (after seven days). You know that seven days are the days of creation, the days of time. It's like God is saying, "At the end of the ages, the end of time, there will be a circumcision. The old will pass away, and the eternal will remain: a circumcision; that is, a cutting off; a judgment; *krisis*—"to cut"; a judgment that establishes an eternal covenant, a new reality, at the end of time. Yet that judgment and covenant will be in you, Abraham, *now*."

Paul tells us that Abraham's circumcision was a sign and a seal of the righteousness that came through faith when God cut the covenant in chapter 15. So Abraham's circumcision was not what saved him; it was the experience of what saved him, in his own flesh.

And, you see, a t-shirt didn't save him.

Genesis 17:14:

"And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

"Better to cut off your foreskin than to be cut off with it." Remember when Jesus said, "If your right hand causes you to sin, it's better to cut it off than to be thrown into Gehenna with it"; that is, cut off with it. Well, it's not our right hand that causes us to sin. It's our heart. Some say that the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach. The quickest way to a man's heart is through that thing that God just asked Abraham to circumcise. That's why it's holy.

Genesis 17:15:

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her."

"Abraham, you will enter Sarah your bride with a new heart. And not as you entered Hagar your slave." Abraham and Sarah used Hagar to try and manufacture the blessing in the power of their own flesh, their own knowledge, and their own efforts. Now God tells Abraham to "cut off" that flesh and commune with Sarah in a new way.

It took Susan and me a good chunk of time to get pregnant with our first child. During that time, my wife was frustrated, angry, and desperate. There was a lot of "activity" but not much

intimacy. Sometimes I'd stop her and say, "You know, I'm really enjoying the frequency of this activity, but sometimes I feel like you're just using me to get a baby." And she'd say, "Oh, no! You're just so attractive." Finally, she broke down before God and surrendered that spot, that place. She gave up on trying to manufacture the blessing. And when she did, she no longer used me to get a blessing. I was the blessing. And then she got pregnant. It doesn't always work that way in the flesh, but I think it does work that way in the Spirit.

Do you ever use God to get His blessings?
What if He *is* the blessing?

Genesis 17:16:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

Answer: Yes! So what begins in pain ends in a communion of delight: Abraham and Sarah's geriatric honeymoon! What begins in pain ends in laughter, in specific, Isaac. Well, that's a little hard for Abraham to believe.

Genesis 17:18:

And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Laughtyer—Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year." Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham. So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all where were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

What a day! That took a lot of faith. Abraham can't explain it, but he does know it. And it's at least faith.

I was there for my son Coleman's circumcision. It was done by a lady doctor, who shared with me that she'd recently gotten a divorce. I could sense some hostility toward men. It took some faith to stand there. Scripture says that God will one day circumcise us. And reading Scriptures, you might sense some hostility on the part of God towards men. So it involves some faith—someone's faith—to stand there.

Circumcision is faith, surrender, vulnerability, and intimacy. In Biblical times, little children knew that when a boy or man is circumcised, the protective layer of skin, covering the end of the man's private part, is cut off leaving the most sensitive part of the man vulnerable and exposed: that part that is mystically, sacramentally connected to the heart.

So Moses and the prophets say, “Remove the foreskin of your hearts” (Jer. 1:4, Deut. 10:16). Jeremiah says of Israel, “Behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hear; behold, the Word of the Lord is unto them a reproach; they have no delight, no pleasure in it” (Jer. 6:10). They are insensitive to it; to Him—the Word of the Lord. There is like a self-protective skin over their ears and their hearts. The Word of God does not penetrate and fill them with delight. So they must be circumcised.

And what is to be cut away?

Read the prophets and you will see: It’s the flesh. Remember from Genesis 3—the “me” that “I” create, with my judgments; the old man; my works, which keep me from grace.

In Deuteronomy 30:6, Moses prophesied, “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.” He must circumcise your heart. And that would take a knife that is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, joint and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

The Word must cut us in order to fill us with delight.

Exodus 44:9: “One must be circumcised to enter the sanctuary, the sanctuary of delight.” We can’t just wear t-shirts, attend a class, or organize a fundraiser. Understand? Well, Abraham didn’t. Moses wouldn’t prophesy for another 500 years. And even Moses didn’t understand how God would perform such a surgery. Abraham didn’t understand; he didn’t know about the covenant, yet he knew the covenant with every nerve ending in his...body.

A crazy, Zen monk held a stick in his hand and asked the younger seeker, “What is it?” The man said, “A stick.” The monk hit the man over the head with it and said, “No, *that’s* what it is.”

Abraham asks God, “What’s a covenant?” and God hits him over the head with it. God hits him in the flesh with it saying, “Circumcise your foreskin.” That’s what it is.

The love of God, the blessing of Abraham, the eternal covenant of grace is not something you simply know with your thoughts and consider in your brain but something you experience in your flesh and know with your entire being. And that’s why theologians, scholars, and religious experts often don’t “get it.” But little children, brides and bridegrooms, tax collectors and prostitutes, shepherds, carpenters, fishermen, and old, wandering nomads do. Comedians do.

[Jim Gaffigan, comedian:]

My wife told me that in the Bible, Abraham circumcised himself. Wow. I can’t even get to the bank before it closes. Abraham did it. God told him to do it. I would have loved to overhear that conversation. “Abraham?” “Oh hey, God, how are you doing?” “I need you to do something for me.” “Oh, sure, you’re God.” “I need you to circumcise yourself.” [Pause] “I think we got a bad connection. Could you send me an email? Are you on Facebook yet?” Those challenges in the Bible took a leap in difficulty there. “Don’t eat this apple, build me a boat, cut off part of your penis.” “What if I build you two boats?” How did Abraham even tell his wife? Maybe he didn’t. He was getting out of the shower, and she said, “What the #%@* have you done?” “Honey, I can explain. God told me to do it.” “If God told you to jump off a bridge, if God told you to sacrifice our first...” “Actually, I have to talk to you about that one.” Now Abraham, he went through the ringer. It’s not like Jesus had a cakewalk though. You think Jesus ever tried to talk God out of some of that stuff? “Hey, Dad, you know that old crucifixion thing?” “Yes, you’re dying on the cross for all mankind’s sins.” “Yeah-yeah...hear me out. What if instead of that we did a big fundraiser.” “No. Now get cracking on your miracles.”

Jim Gaffigan gets it. He gets the meaning, the Word.

Abraham went through the ringer because Jesus went through the ringer.

We go through the ringer because Jesus went through the ringer.

We go through the ringer so we can “get it.”

We taste His pain so we can give birth to His laughter.

The French mystic Jeanne Guyon wrote:

This is the way it was in the life of Paul. He did not ponder the sufferings of Christ; he did not consider the marks of suffering on the Lord's body. Instead, Paul bore in his own body the experiences of his Lord. He even said, “I bear in my body the marks of Jesus Christ.”

Jesus Christ had personally imprinted himself upon Paul, like an eternal covenant established in Paul's flesh. Yet Paul is the one who instructs us to no longer be circumcised. But that's not because we no longer need circumcision; it's because we have already been circumcised.

In Acts 10, Peter preaches the Word to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. As Peter is describing Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit descends on Cornelius and fills him, just like the Spirit filled the sanctuary—the sanctuary Cornelius was not allowed to enter because he was uncircumcised. It was the place of Cornelius' deepest wound. But now he himself was the sanctuary of the living God.

All were amazed, for Cornelius was uncircumcised. And yet, you see, he was circumcised. Through faith Cornelius saw the sign of the covenant: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He saw the Bridegroom of blood and became the Bride of Christ. Isaiah prophesied that God would lift up a sign for the nations (Isa. 11:10-12). Jesus said, “When I am lifted up (on the cross), I will draw all people to myself.” Cornelius received the circumcision of Christ, and his heart was circumcised by the Word that is Christ. The Word cut him and now filled him with delight.

Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. Scripture tells us that Jesus was crucified at the end of the ages. And Jesus tells us that His crucifixion is “the judgment of the world”—the *krisis*—the crisis of this world—the cutting of this world.

- On the cross Jesus bore all of our sin in His body of flesh and was *cut off*—circumcised.
- On the cross He cut off my old man and put it on the cross.
- On the cross He gave me the new man—His faithfulness—Himself. He is the Word that “cuts to the division of my soul and God's Spirit.”
- On the cross God cut the eternal covenant in the body of Christ Jesus my Lord, and through communion the covenant is made in my flesh. He is my Bridegroom of blood.

So if you are offended by this Word, it may be that you're offended by the cross of Christ. If so, don't run, don't hide. Surrender that part that is offended: your dignity your control, your fear, your faithlessness, your flesh. Let Him cut it away...that He might fill you with Himself.

Listen to Paul in Colossians 2:9-14:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Do you see? The circumcision of Christ is the circumcision of God. “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is the heart of God, naked, vulnerable, exposed, and bloody, lifted up for all to see. He is saying, “Children of Abraham, do you see? I AM your blessing. It’s me. Children of Adam, do you see? I’ve given you my heart. And now would you give me yours?” You can’t answer that question by taking a class, throwing a fundraiser, or putting on a t-shirt.

Paul writes, “We are the true circumcision who worship God in Spirit.” On the cross God made the covenant. The covenant forms a sacrament, and the sacrament is a communion.

Do you know what it would have done to me if on my wedding night, in the sanctuary of our covenant, my bride would have said to me, “You want to do *what*? Couldn’t we just wear t-shirts? Matching t-shirts?” It would have killed me. Maybe it did kill Jesus.

I want her to take off the t-shirt; cut off the fig leaves; take off the pretense, arrogance, and pride. I want the experience of faithful, vulnerable, intimate communion. I want *her*. I want her to want me...with a circumcised heart...a naked heart. If I don’t have that, everything else in our marriage is an insult and an abomination.

In Philippians 3:3 Paul writes: “We are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.” We are those who glory in our Bridegroom and put no confidence in our t-shirts, knowledge, and good deeds—that is, our flesh.

We surrender our flesh and glory in the grace of Jesus.
That is worship.
The covenant isn’t a t-shirt.
Worship isn’t a t-shirt.
It’s more like circumcision.
It’s a surrendered life.

God comes to us disguised in the experiences of our life. If you’re like me, sometimes you wonder, “God, why do I have to go through with life? I got the t-shirt, I understand my systematic theology... Why the drama? Why the struggle? Why the experience?”

Abraham must have thought, “God, why do I have to go through with this? Just explain the theology. Why this experience? Ow!!”

People come to me and say, “Why did it happen? Why the divorce? Why the failure? Why the experience? What do I need to learn? What do I need to do?” Answer: maybe nothing. Maybe it’s just what you needed to experience. And by the way, it’s a gift.

When we come to worship, we bring our lives. Do not hide the intimate details of your life. Don’t stuff your shame and bury your emotions. Wherever you’re anxious; wherever you’re afraid, ashamed, arrogant, or guilty; wherever you depend upon yourself to produce the blessing, that’s

your flesh. It's not the blessing. In fact, it keeps you from the blessing. Your flesh is revealed through the experiences in your life.

When we come to worship, we surrender our flesh to the circumcision of Christ, and it is cut away. In that place, we receive His life. So that very place of pain becomes the experience of delight and bears fruit that is life.

It is in *that spot* that you will encounter the blessing.

Writing this sermon, I really struggled. I felt there was something I was supposed to say but wasn't saying. Then this morning I think God showed me what it was. This, right here [on the church platform], even right now, for me is *that spot*. It was 27 years ago, as a young man, that I watched my father tried and stripped of his credentials—his flesh—what he knew and what he did. (He was a pastor.) It was 27 years ago, and he was standing in this very spot.

It was 14 years ago that very miraculously God revealed to me that I had gone into the ministry to cover this spot. What I knew, what I did, was all an effort to protect my heart from this spot. It was my flesh.

For the last seven years, God's been touching me in that spot. And my heart's been saying, "Anything, God, but that spot. Tell me what I need to know, tell me what I have to do, but please don't make me experience that spot."

And now, please believe me: This was not my idea, and I did not make it happen. It wasn't my idea any more than circumcision was Abraham's idea. But for the last year and a half:

God has made me literally, actually, come back and stand in this spot...
which is *that spot*...
bring my flesh, revealed in the events of my life...
to this spot and worship...
the spot where my flesh is cut off in the circumcision of Christ.

- In this spot He has me preach His Word.
- In this spot I then see body broken and blood shed.
- In this spot I encounter my Bridegroom of blood, and I worship.

I can't fully explain it with my heat, but I'm experiencing it with my life. Twenty-seven years ago I walked out of this room, and my heart said, "I will never, ever, ever return to this spot." Twenty-seven years later, in this place of my deepest wound, I'm just beginning to experience God's delight and the birth of new life. This spot has become The Sanctuary. In this spot, I see Him, and I know Him. His name is Jesus, and He is the Blessing.

Communion

That night He took the bread and broke it saying, "This is my body broken, given to you. Take and eat. Do it in remembrance of me." And in the same way, after supper He took the cup and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you...in this spot."

I told you about my spot. You have one too. So pray this after me:

Prayer: Lord God, where is that spot that I won't let you touch?

It could be your entire life. It could be one thing...maybe a memory, a fear, a place of unforgiveness. Understand that Jesus is in that spot, that your wounds are His wounds...first. Now bring that thing—your flesh—to the communion table of the Lord. Let Him cut it away so that in that place He may give you His life.

We're only beginning to see it. For the eternal covenant has been placed within our flesh. So in Jesus' name, believe the Gospel and worship.

Benediction

- How do you circumcise a whale? Four skin divers.
- I had an aunt who worked in the circumcision ward. She didn't make money, but she got a lot of tips.

Do you know that 27 years ago when I stormed out of this room making vows in my heart, God knew that I would be standing in this spot 27 years later telling circumcision jokes? And, you see, circumcision jokes are highly appropriate. It was all I could do to resist a whole string of them! They are highly appropriate, because the next thing that happens in the book of Genesis is Isaac—"laughter."

Yes, we experience some pain here. I watched my dad experience some pain. You experience some pain. We all experience some pain. But now it is absolutely eclipsed by laughter and joy unspeakable. Isaac is an eternal seed who does not go away.

In Jesus' name, believe, even here in *this spot*. Amen.

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