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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Second Sunday in Lent
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Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16
Mark 8.31-38

**People Of The Covenant:
The Scandal Of Particularity**

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. —Genesis 17.7

Those who seek after meaning in human existence and human affairs are often drawn toward universals—they want to find that which is everywhere the same, that which applies to all, that which is unchanging. Such approaches to meaning are not interested in individual cases, they are not concerned with the trivial details of daily life—they seek instead to rise above individual cases and specific lives to that which is above, that which is universal.

Some have sought, and still seek, universality through religion. They think, if I could just find the right technique of meditation, if I could just find the right place of worship, if I could just read the right scriptures—then I could “plug myself in” to that which is universal and unchanging. The goal of this approach is to transcend the triviality of human existence by obtaining oneness with the whole universe.

Others seek ethical or rational universals. The Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, worked doggedly to “seek out and establish the supreme principle of morality.” He wanted to find a hard and fast rule for human behavior, a rule that transcend circumstances, a rule that literally could not be broken by any person who claimed to be rational. Kant argued that in order for a person to act ethically, that person must be willing to make the principle for his or her action into a universal principle, one that would apply always and everywhere. By

doing this, Kant was sure that human beings could, through reason, take part in that which was universal.

Still others have sought universality through politics. Especially in modern times, political thinkers and leaders have promised that individuals can rise above themselves into something higher. Through the perfect state, they argue, individual people can find perfect meaning for their lives, and live in wholeness, rather than in a constant state of alienation.

In all of these ways--religious, ethical, and political—human beings have sought to ground their lives in that which is unchanging and constant, in that which is universal. Unfortunately, as far as I can tell at least, all of these noble efforts have failed. Religious seekers never can seem to find just the right method to become one with the universe—in New Testament times, people jumped back and forth between several different mystery religions, hoping to cover all of the bases. No less today are many people caught on a constant merry-go-round, looking for the perfect religion...the latest TV evangelist or New Age guru always stands at the ready.

As for Kant's universal ethical imperative? A good idea indeed, and one born of the best of intentions and the most careful intellectual rigor. But Kant's idea has never delivered what it promised. If people are rational, he argued, then they can act no other way. But perhaps people aren't so rational, or perhaps life's situations don't fit so neatly into categories of thought. Either way, Kant's philosophy hasn't put an end to the struggles and problems of everyday life.

The failures of the political quests for universals are the most obvious and form the darkest splotches on the canvas of human history. In the name of universal meaning and escape from alienation, totalitarian states delivered to our age the most oppressive and total dictatorships the world has ever seen. Even in our own system of limited government, quests for universal good somehow always seem to end up serving the interests of the group that does the questing. Universal politics, just like universal ethics and universal religion, seem destined to fail. They are all well-intentioned ways to seek meaning, by they seem unable to deliver what they offer.

Alongside all of these human quests for universals--religious, ethical, political--alongside all of these stands the Biblical approach to meaning in human life and human history. In the end, the Bible seeks that which is universal, that is to say, God. But along the way, the Bible is unabashedly and shamelessly interested, not in universals, but in particulars. The Bible is not a book about transcending human life; it is a book about living human life. As such, it is very much concerned with details. To much of human thought, this concern with the particular is scandalous—it is the scandal of particularity that is at the heart of Biblical religion, both in the Old and the New Testaments. This scandal begins with a couple by the name of Abraham and Sarah.

One strain of the Old Testament sees human history as a series of covenants between human beings and God. A covenant is an agreement, a promise, a taking on of obligations that happens between two parties. In the Old Testament, these covenants get narrower and narrower—more and more specific—as human history rolls on. If the Bible were searching for universals, we would expect the opposite. Last week we saw the covenant with Noah. In that covenant, God promised never again to let his anger at the world overcome his commitment to sustain it. Even though that covenant was with Noah, it was universal in character. God was making a promise to the whole world.

Today we read of God's covenant with Abraham. Unlike the covenant with Noah, this covenant with Abraham is a family matter; it is not universal in scope. God isn't making promises to the world; God is making promises to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah have both seen the last of their eighties, in fact Abraham is pushing 100. God's promise to Abraham is that he will be the father of a multitude of nations. God's promise to Sarah is that she, literally, will be the mother of that multitude.

Now, to serious religious seekers, to philosophers, or to political thinkers—to universal thinkers—such a story can be nothing but ridiculous. What can a story about a couple of old folks possibly have to do with the meaning of human history? Besides, who wants anything to

do with a God who wastes his time making covenants with insignificant nomads when there are more important things to do? The particularity of this story does seem scandalous.

But it is this kind of particularity that is the trademark of the Bible's understanding of human life and events. Almost all of the stories in Genesis are family stories—stories about husbands and wives laughing in disbelief at the promise of a son, stories about brothers arguing, stories about brothers defending the honor of their sisters, stories about parents trying to deal with their children's crazy schemes. Through all of these stories gets passed the covenant that begins with Abraham. God chooses a *particular* people to be the agents of his salvation. God throws in his lot, not with the greatest nation on earth, but with a rag-tag bunch of wanderers who are prone to complaining, scheming, and fighting.

And as if all of this wasn't enough, today's story adds scandal upon scandal by talking about, of all things, circumcision! Now what could *that* possibly have to do with meaning in human life? Fortunately, Abraham didn't ask the philosopher's questions, he just responded to God's gracious covenant by doing what he was told. If God wanted circumcision as an outward sign of his trust, then he would give it.

And maybe that is what this story of covenant is really about—outward signs of trust in God. There is nothing very special about Abraham and his family, and certainly there is nothing very special about circumcision. But both can be seen as signs of the way God chooses to transform the world—through making covenants, giving promises to those who trust. Speaking of Abraham, the Apostle Paul wrote,

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us...Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” (Romans 4.16,18)

Paul sees Abraham as a model of faith and trust. In the story of Abraham and Sarah, we can see that God's promises are not ethereal or merely philosophical; they are *real* promises to *real* people. God's intent may be to save the whole world—certainly it is—but God's way of doing it is by entering into covenants with people like Abraham and Sarah.

Much of the Old Testament is a “family story”. It is the story of the working out of the covenant that began with Abraham. The New Testament is a continuation of that same family story. Finally, it is a story about the Redeemer who is the offspring of Abraham and Sarah, the Redeemer who died to make God's covenant perfect for all time.

Around that Redeemer there springs a new family, a family that calls itself the church. It is much like the old family from which it comes. It isn't made up of special people; it is made up of people who have accepted a promise from God. Its members are good and bad, beautiful and ugly, truthful and hypocritical. Like Abraham's family, it does strange things to show that it has a special relationship with God. It takes babies and sprinkles water on their heads, it eats small pieces of bread and drinks little cups of grape juice—what could these things possibly have to do with the meaning of human existence?

Through our faith in Christ, we become descendants of Abraham and Sarah. In so doing, we become part of the story of a God who chooses to deal in particulars, not universals...a God who works in the messy realm of human lives, rather than in the neat arena of religion, philosophy, and political theory...a God who does what gods never do: a God who becomes human himself in order to die for his people. Of all of the particularity in the Bible, that is the most scandalous.

And that is what Lent is all about, and that is why Lent is not a bad time to think about the meaning of the concept of covenant. A covenant is a promise, and God's promise ends with Jesus. God's promise is universal to be sure, but it comes through a particular person called Jesus, and is given to particular people called Abraham and Sarah... and you and me.