

What's Your Sign?

Message for Sunday, October 31, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 17

Two young boys are in the hospital, lying on beds next to each other outside the operating room. The first kid leans over and asks, "What are you here for?"

The second kid says, "I'm here to get my tonsils out and I'm a little nervous."

The first kid says, "You've got nothing to worry about. I had that done when I was four. They put you to sleep, and when you wake up they give you lots of Jell-O and ice cream. It's a breeze."

The second kid then says, "What are you here for?"

The first kid says, "A circumcision."

And the second kid says, "Whoa, I had that done when I was born. Couldn't walk for a year."

Today's Bible reading about Abraham and Sarah makes a big deal about circumcision. I wonder how many of you came here today yearning for a message on circumcision: "I haven't heard a good sermon on circumcision for years. I sure hope that's what Bruce talks about today."

Can I let you in on a little secret? Sometimes preachers come across a Bible passage which leaves them cold. "Who cares about this? What's this got to do with our lives today?"

But the truth is, there are very, very few places in the Bible like that. What I have always found is that if I dig a bit, study the meaning of the words, learn how it fit in the culture of their day, there is usually a connection with our lives today. So let's dig into this passage.

1) Here is what God wants

Genesis 17:9-10, Today's English Version:
God said to Abraham, "You also must agree to keep the covenant with me, both you and your descendants in future generations. You and your descendants must all agree to circumcise every male among you."

That's it: short and to the point. Circumcise all the males.

2) Here is what God offers

a) Descendants

Genesis 17:4, Today's English Version:

"I make this covenant with you: I promise that you will be the ancestor of many nations."

In earlier chapters in Genesis, God's promise was that Abraham and Sarah would have so many descendants, they would be like the stars in the sky, unable to count them all. Now God adds that entire nations will come from them.

To make this stand out, God gives Abram a new name: Abraham, which means "father of multitudes." You can imagine the reaction this got from the servants when they learned their master had changed his name. "Multitudes of wrinkles, that's about all Sarah and Abraham are going to have. What a dreamer this guy is! First he leaves his home, even though he has no idea where he's going. Now he thinks all this land is going to be his, and they are going to have enough children and grandchildren and so on to fill this whole land. Yeah, Abe, that's a good one, alright!"

In our lives, as we aim to follow Jesus, there will be times when people laugh at us, too. "Pray for those who persecute you. Yeah, like to see you try that in business!"

You might even lose some friends. You're with your friends and they're gossiping about someone, saying things about that person they'd never say to his or her face. You interrupt and say, "Excuse me. I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk. If you don't have something good to say about someone, then don't say anything at all." You won't be popular doing that, but you do it anyway, because God tells us to stand up for the oppressed, for justice.

b) Your God

Genesis 17:7, Today's English Version:

"I will keep my promise to you and to your descendants in future generations as an everlasting covenant. I will be your God and the God of your descendants."

In other words, "I will be your God, and I will be with you." With many of the peoples who lived at that time, the idea of "god" was simply a good luck charm. You took a rock and painted a face on it. You took a piece of wood and carved a face on it. Then you bowed down and prayed to your rock or your wood, and asked for whatever favour you wanted. "God" was just a good luck charm. God had something else in mind, something far, far greater than that.

What do I mean — “the peoples who lived at *that* time”?! There are still lots of people today who think of God that way. How often are our own prayers simply a list of things we’d like done, like a shopping list? Still today, God had something else in mind, something far, far greater than that.

God desires most of all a relationship with us: that we will be his people, and he will be our God. Jesus updated that with a surprise: we will be his children, and he will be our Father. So when we pray, it should not be just “Please do this, and I’d like that.” Our prayer should be like a child talking things over with their father. Of course, God is the holy Lord, so worship is also a normal part of our prayer: “Our Father, . . . hallowed be your name.”

c) All the land around here

Genesis 17:8, Today’s English Version:

“I will give to you and to your descendants this land in which you are now a foreigner. The whole land of Canaan will belong to your descendants forever, and I will be their God.”

So God offers all this — descendants, a relationship with the real God, and land. And what do Abraham and Sarah have to do in return? Be circumcised; the males, that is.

That’s quite a deal.

3) Circumcise your heart

Now it turns out that “circumcision” means more than merely cutting a piece of skin off the penis. That operation is just a symbol of belonging to God’s people. Way back at the start of this chapter, we read this:

Genesis 17:1, Today’s English Version:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am the Almighty God. Obey me and always do what is right.”

“Obey me and always do what is right.” That’s the heart of the matter. Follow God’s ways.

Sadly, some among the Jewish people didn’t get this point. They believed that being circumcised — that and that alone — was the guarantee of God accepting them. It didn’t matter what they did, how they treated other people; they were circumcised, so they had their ticket.

In fact, later in the Bible we see the deeper meaning of circumcision:

Deuteronomy 30:6, New International Version:

The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

“Circumcise your heart . . . so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul” That’s what this is really all about. And that’s something which still applies to us today.

Rather than a physical operation, what we need is a spiritual surgery, where God works in our lives to cut out the rebellious, sinful nature, and transforms us to be like his Son, Jesus.

I titled this sermon “What’s your sign?” For the Jews, their sign of belonging is circumcision. For many people today, if you ask them what their sign is, they’ll give their horoscope symbol: Gemini, Libra or the like. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry when I realize people actually make decisions on the basis of what their horoscope says. It’s all just make-believe.

For Christians, our sign is Jesus. Jesus is the heart of all that we do, of who we are.