

*Cut Off, Dried Up, and Full of Hope*  
By Durrell Watkins, MA, MDiv  
Genesis 17.9-14, Lent 2 2009

Are you kidding me with this first reading this morning?

*This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised...For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner...Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. (Gen. 17.9-14)*

**The Light of the Ages/Thanks be to God.**

I saw you out there. Some of you were blushing. A couple of men were crying. Someone looked agitated with me like I had written this unseemly story and shared it just to make everyone uncomfortable. It's the bible!

To be in covenant with God, men have to have to be circumcised when they are 8 days old? Women don't have to do anything special I guess, perhaps women are God's favorites. And what is it about 8 days? Does it count if it's done later?

And notice that you are to have it done to your sons and to your slaves...sons born to you as well as male children that you purchase from foreigners. You never really hear a sermon about buying children and having them circumcised by command of the Almighty. Well, it is odd. Some will think it indecent...improper to even mention the subject.

My great-aunt Gladys was never squeamish about such things. The first time I ever heard the word circumcision I asked Aunt Gladys what it meant. She told me and I was horrified. I then turned to my Uncle Arthur and asked him a very personal question...I asked him if such a ghastly thing had been done to him. He said yes, when I was a baby. I gasped. I asked, "Did it hurt?" He said, "Are you kidding me? I didn't walk for a year."

Now the truth is, that for a number of people in the world, ritual infant male circumcision is very important. And I don't mean to insult anyone for whom it is a truly religious practice. But I do intentionally make light of this passage to shock us a little...to show us how we read some assumptions into the bible that simply are not there. The writers of Genesis 17 are very comfortable talking about the human body and literally seeing divine promise in human flesh. The writers aren't even opposed to a little word play, almost a pun. The passage literally tells that any man who has not had his foreskin cut off will find himself cut off from the larger community.

I'm not an anthropologist, I don't have the skills to analyze ancient patriarchal thinking from another place and culture. I do know that the writers of this passage live in a world where slavery is a fact of life, and they have not yet brought themselves to challenge the unspeakable evil of that practice.

I do know that the writers of this passage were comfortable talking about bodies...that they were earthy, real, embodied people who had no shame in discussing physicality; and I know that the editors of our holy scriptures apparently had no trouble including this and many other stories that speak very frankly about human bodies and physical features.

I know that the community that produced this story honestly regarded male circumcision as a symbol that somehow reminded them of their sacred value.

Scholars tell us that this particular story was probably written during the Babylonian exile. Hundreds of years after it supposedly happened, people who are in exile are keeping their stories alive and someone finally writes some of the down.

To exiled people, a story that says no matter what is happening there is a divine covenant with you that is affirming your sacred value must have been quite comforting. To be aliens in Babylon and to remember a story of their patriarch being an alien in Canaan but being promised an everlasting relationship with God...that story must have seemed relevant and healing to people in their moment of despair.

The story seems to say, "Maybe you have been separated from your history, your land, your freedom...but you cannot be separated from the divine promise that you will be in loving relationship with God no matter what. If you will separate your boy children from their foreskins, that will be a reminder that skin can be cut away, but YOU will never be cut away from the heart of God." It may seem a harsh ritual to our sensibilities, and yet what it was meant to represent we can totally affirm...in fact, it is what the Apostle Paul affirmed...NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.

You see, the story is naming hope. Things are difficult, unfair, overwhelming, but we will dare to believe that God believes in us. When our enemies condemn us, when the larger society overlooks us, when circumstances seem to conspire against us, we will insist that we have sacred value. That's a message that may encourage some of us even still!

Chapter 17 begins with Abram at 99 years old being told he will be an ancestor of a great nation. Abram's name is then changed to Abraham, and his wife Sarai's name is changed to Sarah. She is also very old and is told she will have a child. People in their 90s don't have children, but a story of impossibilities being possible after all can be encouraging when you find yourself feeling hopeless.

How will we ever get out of exile? Well, it could happen...after all, we have a story about people in their 90s having children, and those children multiplied into a great nation, and hundreds of years later we are still part of that nation...the nation may be in exile, but we're still here. So maybe there is reason to hope...maybe that's what the story is really saying....not that circumcision is or isn't a good thing, not that 90 year olds really have babies, but that when everything looks hopeless, religious people somehow find the wherewithal to hope anyway. And sometimes, that hope pays off. Sometimes we remember that God's promise is in our flesh, in our bodies, in our sensuality, in our skin and in our bones...and it is an everlasting promise.

Abram gets a new name. Sarai gets a new name. The people's hope for survival is also named. Even God is named...Chapter 17, verse 1 says, "I am God Almighty...walk before me." Well, that's how it is usually translated. It actually says, "I am El Shaddai," that is, "I am the Almighty Breasted One, the divine One with many breasts."

Sarah is old...her culture would have told her that her breasts were dried up...So God appears to Abraham and Sarah in this story as a Cosmic Mother whose breasts never dry up. A cosmic mother whose nurturing love never dries up...even when we are in exile...even when we are hurting...even when we are scared...even when life isn't fair...El Shaddai is there, promising an everlasting relationship, giving us the power to name our hope and keep it alive so that it can sustain us through the difficult days.

Divine breasts and infant foreskins...who knew that was in the bible. But maybe for people like us, such an earthy, real, and uncensored story, a story that dares to name outrageous hope, that dares to affirm the sacred value of all people is especially the word of God...or as I like to say, this is the good news. Amen.

**I am a person of outrageous hope.  
I am a person of sacred value.  
I am a person filled with divine love.  
I am a person who is blessed right now.  
And so it is!**

"Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence." – Lin Yutang (Chinese writer and inventor)