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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Genesis 17:1-8; 15-22

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Deep Commitment

Good morning Hutterthal Mennonite Church! Thank you for joining virtually in our Sunday morning worship. And good morning also to all of you who join us at a later time. We are even more deeply aware in this moment because we are not physically present to each other that we worship in limited forms this morning, but we earnestly await a soon-coming day when normalcy returns. South Dakota is among the top states currently doling out vaccinations as quickly as possible. We can feel the weight and the hope of these moments together. We look to each other for continued support, encouragement, and prayer. Let us pray! God Almighty, we come to you this morning, weary and burdened with this pandemic and all that comes with it. We pray for all of the healthcare workers and first responders who are working tirelessly to get things back to normal. We thank you that your commitment to relationship with us is not dependent on our actions or our own failed commitments. We pray this morning that your spirit would strengthen and renew us for the days ahead as we continue to commit our lives, hearts, minds, and bodies to your mission in this world. We ask for guidance as we hold onto your son Jesus, the Messiah, even when the world around us attempts to distract us with shallow experiences and flashy products that demand our attention, our time, and our talents. Give us the strength to choose you, to choose our neighbors, and to choose your creation over ourselves. Help us live our commitment to the Jesus way. In the name of Jesus, our Lord and King, we pray. Amen.

Morgan and I got married in April 2014. We will be celebrating our 7th wedding anniversary this spring. Last August in the midst of frustrating Illinois COVID-19 restrictions, I had the blessing of officiating my little brother's private wedding ceremony outside of his home. It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday afternoon. The wedding only lasted 20 minutes, but those 20 minutes were some of the most meaningful in my short life. With only family and a few friends present, we celebrated and supported these two young people's love and commitment. As I prepared for this sermon, I thought about my little brother's wedding, my own wedding, and deep commitment, our topic for this second week of Lent. Commitment is deep and true, a transformative choice that we continually make. Deep commitment is an integral part of any relationship, whether with God, a spouse, a friend, a mentor, a family member, or a colleague.

When I think about commitment, I think about the ring on my left hand that symbolizes my choice every day to be with Morgan. When I think about commitment, I think about my baptism and the ways that God, a particular church community, and I are bound together. When I think about commitment, I think about waking up in the middle of the night and sleeping on the floor next to Vivienne's crib so that she can fall back to sleep. When I think about commitment, I also think about promises that I have broken. I have hurt people in my life deeply, probably more deeply than I will ever realize. I know that commitment is hard, especially when our closest companions hurt us. When I think about commitment, I think about my deepest wounds because commitment requires openness, vulnerability, and transparency. As much as we hate to say it, sometimes the deepest hurts come from our closest family and friends. Commitment opens our lives and our hearts to other broken people who may not reciprocate. Finally, when I think about deep commitment, I think about forgiveness and transformation as deep and true relationship changes us and the people around us just as the Spirit has also done in our lives.

Deep commitment is central to the God that I read about in the scriptures. I think about God's commitment to creation and to his image-bearers. I think about the deep relationship that we explored last week with Noah and the rainbow. When I think about deep commitment, I remember that the same experiences that I have had in my own life, God has also had throughout the scriptures. I remember that God has committed to never flood the earth again in response to evil. God's first commitment is not a requirement imposed on God by the creation or God's image-bearers. God commits because God chooses to stick with his created world in spite of its brokenness. God invites us also to do the same.

Later in Genesis, God offers love, hope, forgiveness, and relationship to Abram, but Abram does not always reciprocate. By the time that we get to our story in Genesis 17, we know that Abram is broken like the rest of us. Abram struggles with commitment and trusting God. How many of us can relate to that? God has already promised Abram that a land and descendants await him. In ancient cultures, land and descendants were all that a patriarch would have been worried about. In Genesis 12, God asks Abram to leave his homeland and move to a land that God will show him. After following God's lead and making space in the land, Abram encounters threats to God's commitment.

Famine threatens first, forcing Abram to flee to Egypt so he doesn't starve. While there, out of fear of Egyptian leaders, Abram lies, telling the Egyptian king that Sarai is his sister. After the Egyptian king takes Sarai into his harem, God punishes the king and the king is furious with Abram for lying to him, so the king tells Abram to leave. Once back in the land, family disputes and foreign enemies disrupt Abram's attempts again at making space in the land. God speaks again in Genesis 15, promising land and descendants and formalizing the promise with a covenantal ceremony that includes a smoking fire pot, a flaming torch, and butchered animals.

But the relationship is still under attack, and Abram is ready to give up. Abram continues to offer his own alternatives to God's promises. Abram suggests that God just pass his blessing on to Abram's closest relative, Eliezer of Damascus, but God says no. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation, where you're pretty certain of what God is calling you to, but it seems to difficult so you try to come up with other ideas that might get at the same idea, but God seems to keep telling you no?

After God says no to Abram's suggestions, the next enemy is biological and very close to Abram. Barrenness, a common biblical theme, has afflicted Sarai, the chosen mother of Abram's descendants. Abram has already questioned God with all of the other disruptions, wondering how God is ever going to deliver on his promises. First, famine, then familial conflict, then foreign enemies threatening his family, and now barrenness. "How is God ever going to make good on the covenant?" Abram wonders. So Abram decides to take matters into his own hands. How often do we find ourselves in similar situations? Growing impatient with God's timing, we decide that it will be better if we just make things happen the way that we think is best. How often has that turned out well just in these first 15 chapters of scripture when people decide to do what they think is best? Abram lays with Sarai's Egyptian slave, Hagar, so that hopefully she will bear Abram a son. Hagar becomes pregnant with Abram's first son, Ishmael, but this blessing does not make Sarai happy at all. Hagar has usurped Sarai's proper role as wife and mother, rendering Sarai in her barrenness somewhat obsolete. Sarai's indignation and contempt for Hagar forces Abram to send Hagar and Ishmael away to most likely die. As I picture Hagar and Ishmael walking away from the camp, I am saddened because human brokenness can have so many unforeseen consequences. God does not give up on Hagar and Ishmael even when God's chosen person has already messed up. This story of Abram and Sarai is filled with grace

and mercy as God walks with them, committed even their poor decision-making and arrogance. It is in these moments in scripture that I am sad, but I am also hopeful because I like to think that God is doing the same with all of us.

When we begin Genesis 17, Abram is at his wits' end. It seems as if all of these promises and covenants are falling through. For the third time, God visits Abram. In this encounter, God reiterates what has already been promised to Abram, land and descendants. It's almost as if God is reminding Abram that no matter what Abram tries to do to mess it up, God is not going to give up on him and Sarai. On this third conversation, God adds a couple of more dimensions to this evolving relationship. When I think about commitment, I think about name changes. Especially in marriage, partners are changing their names as symbols of their commitment to each other. What was once only the responsibility of the female in a marriage relationship has taken on meaning for both participants as several friends of Morgan and I have used their marriage to forge a new identity together in the world. In Lesotho, women especially are given new names at major life events such as marriage and their first child's birth. Almost as a memorial of the moment and a reminder of commitment, changed names help us see how commitment can transform us, especially as we get to know our spouse or new child better. In this same vein of marking a major change in life, God changes both Abram and Sarai's names. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah, both new names carrying the weight of God's promise that he will provide a multitude of descendants to this sojourning couple.

If the previous stories are not evidence enough, Abraham is true to form as he laughs at God and his reiterated promise. How many times have you listened to the Spirit speaking to you, but the idea seems to absurd or ridiculous to be true? We struggle to hear God sincerely, especially when God's promises seem so outlandish in comparison to our present circumstances. What promises

of God have you been reminded of in this season of frustration and anger and division and hopelessness and pain? Or maybe you have given up on what God has spoken or promised and decided to take things into your own hands because God obviously does not know what God is doing? This might sting to hear, but we all struggle with trust and commitment.

When I think about deep commitment, I realize too that God's everlasting covenant in this story becomes the person Jesus many years later. Even after Abraham laughs and the people of Israel struggle to hold God's covenant, God still comes to earth in the midst of all of us, committed to making things right and healing all of us, no matter how many times we have resisted or given up. Like a parent committed to their children or a spouse committed to their partner, God holds out hope for all of us, speaking to us and calling us from the brokenness and sin that have so deeply affected us. God knows that the love that undergirds his commitment is transformative. God is not giving up on us. Let us not give up on each other.

Let us pray! God of deep commitment, we thank you for how you continue to open your arms and embrace us even when we stray from our commitments. We look to you for the strength and hope in this moment when we are weary of this season with COVID. We ask for the Holy Spirit's rejuvenating presence as we continue day by day, living in the here, but not yet, as we wait for vaccinations and we hold out hope for normalcy. Fill us with your love and peace as we commit again to each other, to you, and to your creation. Help us this Lenten season to look inwardly and think deeply. In Jesus's name we pray. And all God's people said. Amen.

Benediction:

Go today, knowing that you are called to the kind of commitment that will not leave you comfortable. Our God is not to be fully known or neatly packaged. Be ever ready for the transformation that accompanies deep commitment. Go, expecting surprise. Amen.