

Fifth Revelation – Intimacy - Genesis 17:1-27¹

Before the Lesson - Have the poster (from lesson 1, also found at the end of this lesson plan) or the words from that poster written on a board for the Information session. Prepare AV equipment to play the 4-minute YouTube video: “Amy Grant - El Shaddai (Lyric Video)” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qJMI951b9k) for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

Do you have (or have you ever had) a nickname? What?

Do you have a daily habit of walking? Do you keep track of your steps?

Information

[Point to the poster, “Abraham’s Faith Journey.”]

Let’s review the growth of Abram’s faith and his relationship with Yahweh.

In his first revelation, God speaks - “Go!”- and Abram goes toward a land he does not know.

In the second revelation, God shows Abram the land that he will occupy.

In the third revelation, God has Abram walk the land, claiming it for himself and his descendants.

In the fourth revelation, God reminds Abram that he will be the Father of a great nation – and Abram argues with God! Then God strengthens the promise by “cutting a covenant” (as Abram cuts a heifer, a goat, and a ram in half).

Abram’s journey of faith has involved listening, seeing, walking, and sacrificing.

In his relationship with God, Abram has been observant, obedient, and active. But it has also been a relationship with its ups and downs. The progression of faith is not a straight line pointing up.

Maybe it’s his age, maybe it’s the long time between the promise and the fulfillment, but Abram is also getting a little cranky with God. He is a real human being with limited faith, limited understanding, and little time who is trying to partner with the eternal God.

- Have a class member read Genesis 17:1-4.

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For only the second time, Abram gets to see God. “Seeing” is an important word in Abram’s life of faith. He sees the land that God promises. He sees God. He sees these sacrificial animals and God’s fire that moves between the split-open parts. Abram is 99 years old. What has he not yet seen? (A baby!)

In verse 1, we are given another name for God in this passage. How does this read in your translation and footnotes?

Here are the names for God we have received so far in the Abram faith journey story:

[Write the names of God, italicized below, on the board.]

- *Yahweh* – Abram “called on the name of the LORD” (12:1, 8)
- Melchizedek called God *El Elyon*, “God of the sky,” which Abram adopted (14:18-23)
- Hagar called God, *El Roi*, the “God who sees me.” (16:13)
- *El-Shaddai*, usually translated God Almighty. (17:1)

“*El Shaddai*. The first term, as in *El Elyon* (chapter 14) means God. Scholarship has been unable to determine the origins or precise meaning of the second term – tenuous associations have been proposed with a Semitic word meaning ‘mountain’ and with fertility. What is clear is that the biblical writers considered it an archaic name of God.”²

Now, I am going to share something with you that my Old Testament professor shared with us, but it is a little bit embarrassing. But you are grown-up and the Bible is a book for grown-ups, so I think you can handle it.

Imagine you are walking in a flat, dry, lifeless desert. Ahead of you is a mountain that has water, plants, and trees for shelter and protection from the sun. Or, maybe there are two mountains.

Put together what scholars know about this word: *Shaddai* is the word used for breasts and it is used for mountains. Put those together and you may not look at mountains the same again. *El-Shaddai* is the “god of breasts.” Can you see how mountains and breasts are the same word?

European/American scholars have a hard time saying that or inviting us to imagine it. Why do you think that is? How could that image help us understand God better? How is the common translation, “God Almighty,” both accurate and inaccurate?

“Another word much like *Shaddai*, and from which many believe it derived, is *shad* meaning ‘breast’ in Hebrew (some other scholars believe that the name is derived from an Akkadian word *Šadu*, meaning ‘mountain,’ suggesting strength and power). This refers to God completely nourishing, satisfying, and supplying [God’s] people with all their needs as a mother would her

² Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 72.

child. Connected with the word for God, *El*, this denotes a God who freely gives nourishment and blessing.”³

[If there is interest, here are the other uses of El-Shaddai, all of which make sense being translated as “God of Breasts,” as they refer to fertility. Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3.]

What is the story of Abram and Sarai about? Becoming parents of a great nation. Fertility. And, a safe place, a home, and a homeland.

Okay, we have gotten through the first half of the first verse in our chapter. Let’s move on.

What is God’s command to Abram? (“Walk with me”)

“*Walk with Me*. The Hebrew is literally ‘before me.’ In verse 18, the same preposition manifestly has the idiomatic sense of ‘in your favor,’ and that may be true here as well. The verb is the same used for Enoch’s walking with God, but there the Hebrew preposition is actually ‘with.’”⁴

“The Hebrew for ‘walk’ in this visit is the same verb as in the challenge to ‘walk the land’ in visit three. Abram passed the test to go out and walk land boundaries that would be no boundaries, in reality, for hundreds of years. One might feel foolish on such a walk, but one knows what to do, and in a few days or weeks, it’s over, done with. But walk with God? Some translations have the more literally accurate, ‘walk before me,’ or in God’s favor. Perhaps Abram is being asked to walk in such a path as God would take, if on earth. Abram has to walk with God’s challenges in mind, ‘before’ his every step. Whether ‘walk with me’ or ‘walk before me,’ the challenge assumes increasing human responsibility.”⁵

“To walk before God is to walk in the ways of God: to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with one’s God (Micah 6:8). Thus, Abram is instructed not only to do justice but to teach the world justice.”⁶

How does the command, “walk with me” assume “increasing human responsibility?”

In verse three, we have yet another name for God, Elohim.

[Write the word Elohim on the board.]

It is a plural word. There is El, which means God. Elohim is the plural of El. That is, there is only one God, but this one God is sometimes referred to in the plural, like “the royal we.”

³ https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name_god.cfm

⁴ Alter, 72.

⁵ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 71.

⁶ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 178.

Once more, Abram ‘flung himself on his face’ “before this less familiar and more remote aspect of God, Elohim. God is one, but God appears in differing divine aspects for specific persons in specific circumstances for specific reasons, all of which can be understood only within the fuller context of the story. The possible meaning for Elohim, ‘God of all peoples,’ is reinforced by the immediate context here: Abraham’s being renamed by Elohim is done so with a repeated emphasis on his role for a ‘multitude of nations.’”⁷

Once again, God itemizes each party’s part in the covenant.

“The articulation of the covenant in this chapter is organized in three distinct units – first the promise of progeny and land, then the commandment of circumcision as sign of the covenant, then the promise of Sarah’s maternity.”⁸

“‘As for Me...as for you...’ Such shared responsibility has been clear from visit one but here is made explicit...which reinforces the growing mutuality of partnership responsibility, though God will always be paramount in this partnership.”⁹

- Have class members read Genesis 17:4-8; 9-14; 15-22; 23-27.

“The promise...concerns the *fundamental relation* of Yahweh and Abraham as belonging to each other. Thus, the promise concludes, ‘I will be their God’ (v. 8). This is a promise even more fundamental than the land. While the action is singularly unilateral and talks only of God’s commitment to Abraham, the formula clearly presumes the unspoken counter-theme, ‘You shall be my people.’ (Cf. Exodus 6:2-7 for the full formula.)”¹⁰

“Abram laughs. No doubt, God must also have laughed, explaining why this future child is to be called Isaac, which in Hebrew means, ‘he laughs.’”¹¹

“By verses 17-18, Abraham completely doubts the promise, laughs a mocking laugh, and appeals to the son already at hand. Abraham, the father of faith, is here again presented as the unfaithful one, unable to trust, and willing to rely on an alternative to the promise... The laugh and the reference to Ishmael are attempts to avoid the deep and unsettling claim God now makes on him.”¹²

Abram’s name is changed to Abraham. Sarai’s name is changed to Sarah. And, again, the emphasis seems to be on fertility and the roles they will play as the patriarch and the matriarch of a new people.

⁷ Borgman 74.

⁸ Alter, 72.

⁹ Borgman, 72f.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 154.

¹¹ De la Torre, 179.

¹² Brueggemann, 156.

“The meaning of both versions [Abram/Abraham] is something like ‘exalted father.’ The longer form is evidently no more than a dialectical version of the shorter one. The real point is that Abraham should undergo a name change – like a king assuming a throne, it has been proposed – as he undertakes the full burden of the covenant. Similarly in verse 15, the only difference between Sarai and Sarah is that the former reflects an archaic feminine suffix, the latter, the normative feminine suffix: both versions of the name mean ‘princess.’”¹³

Abraham and Sarah are again promised a new status – parents. The name change could also represent a new status in their relationship with God. What status change is happening with that role?

“The change of name indicates a change of status. And what is this new status? Perhaps it is what the text here emphasizes. With God’s visiting help, Abraham has been growing into partner status with God, demonstrated in the language of reciprocity.”¹⁴

In our last revelation, Abram argued with God. What is Abram’s response to God in this chapter?

- (He falls on his face (in fear? in reverence?), 17:3)
- He falls on his face (again) and laughs, 17:17
- He offers God a Plan B in Ishmael, 17:18
- He begins “cutting a covenant” with the cuts of circumcision, 17:23f.)

Circumcision was not unique to the Hebrews. In Egypt, for example, it was a rite of puberty for males. For Abraham and his family, it signified a covenantal partnership with God.

“This time, Abraham is to be more personally involved. The prior cutting was external to Abraham. It didn’t hurt him, at least physically, to cut the animals in half. But now in visit five God proposes that Abraham cut his own flesh – the foreskin of his penis – and that of all male members in his family.”¹⁵

Obviously, this was painful. Did Abraham have a choice? Could he have negotiated something less painful, yet more obvious, like a tattoo or a unique hairstyle? Could he have walked away from the covenant uninjured? What does this say about the journey of faith?

The Womanist scholar Wil Gafney asks some questions of this text:

“The sign that God chooses for the covenant between Godself and Abraham, his household, and his descendants excludes Sarai, the women of their household, and all of the women among their

¹³ Alter, 73.

¹⁴ Borgman, 73.

¹⁵ Borgman 75.

descendants. So is God really the God of the uncircumcised Sarai and her daughter descendants?”¹⁶

Where does Sarah fit into the covenant? She is the mother of the covenant. For the first time, God makes it clear that many nations will come from *her* womb.

In the previous chapter, Sarah tried to help Abraham (and God) by conscripting her slave, Hagar.

“As a woman who lives in a world where ‘a woman’s womb was her destiny,’ Sarai was compelled to find a way to provide her husband with the child she personally could not offer.”¹⁷

It turns out, funnily enough, that Sarah is essential to God’s plan. She will mother a child.

“The promise is really to Sarai, not Abram. After all, he already has a child and after Sarai’s death will have six more with Keturah. It is not his seed that carries the promise, but Sarai’s womb.”¹⁸

Transformational Exercise

Like Abraham, we are invited to “walk with God.” God invites us to have an intimacy that can not be had with a distant, overbearing God. Christians believe that God incarnated that desire for intimacy through the life of Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah used another word for God, Immanuel, to signify this desire of God to walk with us, as we walk with him.

- Have class members read Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22-23.

Immanuel means, “God with us.” That is God’s dream, that God will be in us and that we will remain in God.

- Have class members read John 15:4-5, 10 and 1 John 2:6, 28.

Maybe one reason we have so many names for God in the Bible is so we will not put God in a box. When we try to do that, God reveals God’s truth and love and justice in *another* word or image. Mediating on each of these names gives us a fresh opportunity to gain new insights about our God.

We will conclude this lesson by listening and meditating on the new name given for God in this passage, El-Shaddai.

¹⁶ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 35.

¹⁷ Rodney Sadler, s.v., “Genesis,” *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures From African and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 75. Quoting Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988), 3.

¹⁸ De la Torre, 175.

Play the 4-minute YouTube video: “Amy Grant - El Shaddai (Lyric Video)”
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJMI951b9k>) – The lyrics are on the video. (The words, Erkamka na Adonai, are from Psalm 18:1, “I love you, O Lord, my strength.”)

Abraham's Faith Journey

Belief

Trust

Obedience

Partnership

Intimacy

Righteousness

Stewardship