

Rev. Dan Welch      Advent 1      11-28-21      Text- Genesis 17:1-9  
*Undaunted Courage* is a book by Stephan Ambrose. In it, Ambrose

writes about the Lewis and Clark expedition that took place in the early 1800s. After facing massive challenges—hunger, fatigue, desertion, illness and so much more—Lewis and Clark (near Three Forks, Montana) finally reached the headwaters of the Missouri River.

All of their advance information led Merriwether Lewis and William Clark to believe that once they had reached the continental divide—just one-hundred miles west of Three Forks—they would face a half-day portage, reach the waters of the Columbia River, and then float to the Pacific Ocean. The hard part of the journey was behind them. It was time to celebrate. Or so they thought!

Meriwether Lewis climbed the bluffs near the Continental Divide, expecting to see the Columbia River. Imagine what he felt when, instead of seeing the Columbia River, he was the first non-native American to see the Rocky Mountains. They couldn't go back, and there was no clear way forward. We have a word for that—trapped.

Do you know that feeling? I think, we all do, in some way, shape, or form. Maybe we recently conquered a bad habit, only to suffer a relapse. Maybe we feel stuck in a dead-end job, a dead-end relationship, a dead-end life—or all of the above. Like Lewis and Clark, we can't go back and, like Lewis and Clark, there is no clear way forward. We have a word for that —trapped.

Welcome to the world of Abraham and Sarah. Their story begins in Genesis 11. Abram, as he was called then, was the son of a man named Terah. The family was from the ancient Babylonian city called Ur. It was in Ur that Abram met Sarai, that was **her** name back then. At some point Abram and Sarai married and then moved from Ur to Haran, a city on the Tigris River.

Then God showed up. In Genesis 12, God called Abram and Sarai to go to the land of Canaan where he would make a great nation through, of all people, Abram and Sarai. Abram was seventy-five years old then; Sarai was sixty-five. Genesis 11:30 says that Sarai was barren. Can you imagine what Abram and Sarai said? “A great nation? But we can’t have any

children. And look how old we are!" And so, they waited. And waited. And waited some more. Still, no son.

They got tired of waiting when Abram turned eighty-six and Sarai turned seventy-six years old. Who could blame them? Sarai came up with the idea for her maidservant, Hagar, to become Abraham's concubine and nine months Hagar gave birth to Abraham's son, Ishmael.

Thirteen years later, in Genesis 17, Abram is ninety-nine and Sarai is eighty-nine years old. Sarai is still barren; the household is still filled with rancor and strife because of the Hagar and Ishmael debacle. We have a word for that—trapped.

Then God showed up. Genesis 17:1 states, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty.'" The Hebrew phrase behind the title "God Almighty" is El Shaddai. El Shaddai means that God is sufficient; God is able; God is powerful. El Shaddai means that God is almighty.

What does El Shaddai do when He shows up? He cuts a covenant. The term "covenant" appears five times in our reading from Genesis 17.

In fact, “covenant” appears another eight times in the rest of Genesis 17.

Additionally, in three of these references in Genesis 17 (verses 7, 13, and 19) God says that this covenant is eternal. Do you think God is trying to make a point?

In the Old Testament, covenants weren’t made. In the Old Testament, people didn’t sign their names to paper to make a covenant. There were no attorneys or notary publics. But there was blood. That’s because in the Old Testament, people **cut** covenants. They killed animals, slit their throats, and poured out their blood. Covenant cutting was a messy business.

God fulfilled His covenant promise to Abraham and Sarah through the birth of a son—Isaac. Even more, God fulfilled His covenant promise to us through the birth of his son—Jesus. That’s what we look forward to celebrating this Advent season. God showed up—again!

And you can be sure that there was blood—in Gethsemane, Gabbatha, and Golgotha. The everlasting covenant promised to Abraham is signed, sealed, and delivered for you. Signed in the Savior’s cleansing

blood. Sealed by the Holy Spirit. Delivered in the means of grace—the Gospel, Baptism, and Holy Communion where Jesus says, “This is the blood of My covenant, shed for you, for the forgiveness of sin.”

But we hear other voices when we feel trapped, don’t we? And these are persuasive voices. Hedonism says, “Party your way out!” Materialism says, “Spend your way out!” Individualism says, “You are the way out!” And nihilism says, “There is no way out!” If we listen to these voices long enough, our feeling of despair becomes an insidious virus that destroys our body, mind, and soul. Trying to self-medicate only gets us further trapped in patterns of self-sabotage.

When we feel trapped, we definitely don’t whistle while we work. And when others whistle while they work? We give them the look. You know. The look! That “are you that naïve?” look. We scold them, “Haven’t you read the news and heard the reports and seen the studies? Airplanes fall out of the sky. Bull markets go bear. Terrorists terrorize. Good people turn bad. The other shoe will drop. Fine print will be found!”

Feeling trapped in a dead-end job or dead-end relationship twists us into emotional pretzels, makes our eyes twitch, our blood pressure rise, our heads ache, and our bodies sweat. We numb our pain with alcohol and food binges and too much TV. We express our angst with loud bursts of anger and silent stares—we're experts at both. Today some of us may even feel like we're at the end of our rope. But hear this loud and clear. God has shown up in Jesus Christ! We are not trapped! Say “no” to that lie.

Sin can't trap us. Jesus forgives that. Death can't trap us. Jesus conquered that. Hopelessness can't trap us. Jesus hears our prayer! “No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck you from his hand!” we sing in the song “In Christ Alone” by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend. “I am convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Those are words of St. Paul. “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:7). Those are the words of God to Abraham and Sarah.

What does it all mean? No matter what you may be feeling trapped by--caring for small children, worrying about teenagers, a broken heart, or an overwhelming feeling that everything's gone terribly wrong—wait upon the Lord with faith.

Because of Christ's everlasting blood-covenant with you, death is dead, sin is forgiven, hope is eternal, the victory is won! We have a word for that—free. The waiting is over. When Christ was born, God fully showed up. Jesus is our Immanuel, our God-with Us. Put your faith fully in Him. Because of this little baby, you are forever free. Amen.