

God's Old Promises

January 12, 2020

Psalm 29: 1-11

¹ Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. ² Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor. ³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters. ⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. ⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. ⁷ The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸ The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. ⁹ The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!" ¹⁰ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. ¹¹ May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Isaiah 42: 5-9

⁵ Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶ I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹ See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.



As we begin 2020 and a new decade, I wanted to begin the new year by offering a sermon series that looks at the larger picture of scripture. We will begin in the Old Testament, with the covenants as the big picture of God's early relationship with humanity. We will work our way to the New Testament, where Jesus came as the fullest revelation of God to date, establishing the new covenant. As an added layer to the 20/20 sermon series we will continue to look at our unique Methodist approach to a life of faith. We have a good start to this layer from the Advent sermon series and from our Advent study. In both of these we studied John Wesley's concept of being an "altogether Christian". The alternative, of course, was being to be an "almost" Christian. Now that you have an idea of where we will be going for today and for the next five weeks, let us begin with a word of prayer. Let us pray...

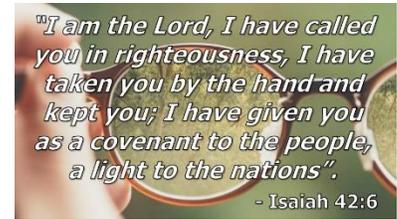


We begin the series and we begin today in what has become known as the Old Testament, reviewing "who" God is as well as where our faith story begins as we look at God's promises as defined by covenant relationship. The traditional labels for the two parts of the Bible were, in fact, the "old covenant" and the "new covenant". The various covenants that we find in the Bible are the "spiritual glue" that binds God's promises to the fulfillment of God's plan. In the big picture, we will see how each covenant works out God's relationship with humanity and how each successively provides further divine assurance that God will realize his purpose for creation and for humanity. In the broadest sense, God's purpose is to one day fully establish his new kingdom here on earth.

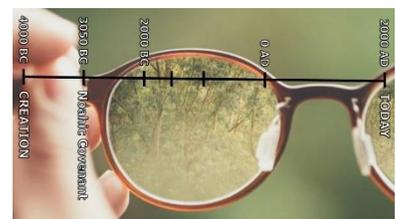
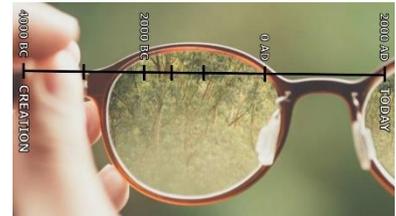
To begin to understand the answer the “who God is” question, we will begin with the image of God presented in Psalm 29. From there we will continue as we seek to better understand the character of God by exploring the covenants. As we begin with Psalm 29, here God is described with the terms glory, strength, and splendor. God’s glory thunders over the waters and breaks the cedars. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire and shakes the wilderness, stripping the forest bare. The psalmist draws near to a close in our passage by reminding us that God sits enthroned over the flood as the one king forever. The image portrays God as full of power and might, which God certainly is. But there is also a distance that is felt in the Psalm and it is also often implied in other parts of the Old Testament. There is a felt separation between God and humanity. The Psalm concludes with a request for strength and peace for the people of God. In the presence of this image of God, strength and peace are a good request.

As we turn to Isaiah 42, our passage also has this distant feel as it begins. In the opening verse, Isaiah reminds us that it is God who created the heavens and the earth and all that comes from the earth. We are reminded that it all belongs to God. He then reminds us that it is God who gives breath and spirit to those of us who walk upon the earth. So we too belong to God. There is a sense, like in Psalm 29, that God is God and, well, we are not. But quickly, in the next verse, we read of God’s desire to be in a relationship with the chosen people and to use them in his plan for the restoration of the world. In verse six we see that this powerful, glorious, strong God really wants to connect with his creation, with you and me, in an intimate way.

There, in verse six, we read: *"I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations"*. In these words, we hear a deep level of care for us. God himself has called us, has held us by the hand, has kept us. And there is a purpose: to give us as a covenant to others, as a light to the nations. In order to understand this purpose, we now turn to the idea of covenant. As I said earlier, the covenants are the glue that holds together God's promises to humankind and the fulfillment of his promises for all of creation. Understanding each covenant and how they work together will help us to understand how God desires to be in relationship with us and also to envision how of each of us can then be a light to the nations.

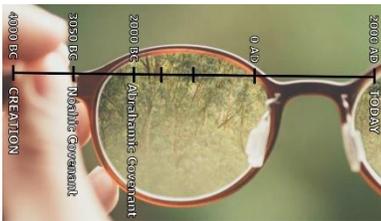


There are five major covenants that we find in the Bible. Some scholars would argue that there are eight main covenants in the Bible, but for our purposes today we will stick to the five major covenants. Most of the covenants are found in the Old Testament. The New Testament is centered upon what is known as the "new covenant". From creation to today, our Biblical history represents roughly 6,000 years. For the sake of making a little sense of this expanse of time, we can break it up into three 2,000-year periods. Starting in chronological order, which is basically how the Bible is written, we begin with the covenant that God established with Noah or the Noahic Covenant. In about 3050 BC the earth was flooded, bringing great devastation. God chose to



preserve humanity through those on the ark and then promised to never again destroy the earth through divine interruption. In this covenant God promises in grace to preserve the earth and humanity so that the savior, who we identify as Jesus Christ, could come at the appointed time in God's redemptive plan. This covenant is sealed with a sign: the rainbow. In the Noahic covenant God reveals himself as a forever God and one full of grace – humanity will remain on the earth until the culmination of God's plans to restore all of creation.

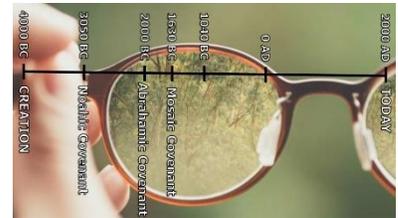
About 1000 years later, in 2000 BC, God establishes the Abrahamic Covenant. In



Genesis 12, God calls Abram to leave his homeland to travel to a land that God will show him. Once Abram obeys, God offers a divine promise that encompasses two blessings, one coming in Genesis 15 and the second

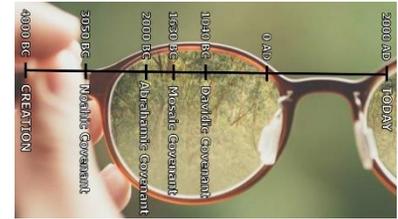
in Genesis 17 and 22. The first blessing is that God will make Abraham into a great nation. This begins with the birth of Isaac and then with the birth of Jacob and then the birth of his twelve sons that become the twelve tribes of Israel. The second blessing is that through Abraham God will mediate a blessing to others. God will fulfil this promise by sending his only begotten Son to be born in the flesh as a descendant of Abraham. This covenant is also sealed with a sign. In Genesis 17, God seals the covenant with the sign of circumcision. In the Abrahamic covenant God establishes a special relationship with those who worship God. Yes, all are God's children, therefore beloved, but in this covenant we begin to see a differentiation between humanity in general and those who worship God. Here was also first hear that God will begin the redemption process through and with the descendants of Abraham.

As the Bible progresses into the book of Exodus, God's people have moved to Egypt and have become enslaved by the Pharaohs. Here they flourish, despite harsh treatment, and they become a large nation. In response to their cries, God uses Moses to lead the people to freedom. As they wander in the desert, they eventually come to Mount Sinai. Beginning in Exodus 19, God mediates a new covenant through Moses. In about 1630 BC, Moses comes down the mountain and shares God's words with the people. These words would become known as the Mosaic covenant. Through Moses, the people are called to obey God's voice and to keep his commands. In exchange, the Israelites will be God's treasured people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This covenant guaranteed the preservation of Israel by providing sacrificial worship, a means to atone for sin and to symbolically express God's forgiveness. But this covenant is a conditional covenant. In essence, God is saying that the Israelites will be his people if they obey his commands. As the covenant and its stipulations continue to unfold through Exodus 23, it becomes clear that the Israelites must fulfill God's stipulations in order to stay and prosper in the land God had given them. In the Mosaic covenant we see the first conditional covenant - the people have a choice to make and, when they make the right choice, they stay within right relationship with God. When they sin and experience separation from God, the covenant offers sacrificial worship as a means to be made right again with God. Over time, though, the impossibility of obeying all the commands would become evident. This would lead to the need for a Savior. The existing covenant structure would provide a forum for Christ to come and to be the perfect and once-for-all sacrifice for sin.



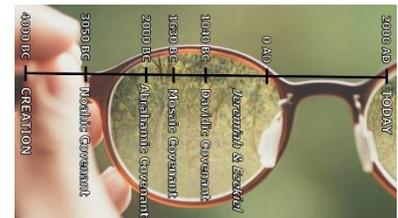
The last Old Testament covenant would come in about 1040 BC. The first king, Saul, has failed to measure up to God's standards and David has become the second king of Israel. In 2nd Samuel 7, in response to God's blessings to him, David desires to build a "house" for God. David resides in a palace and does not feel it is right for God to dwell in a tent – the tabernacle. God informs David, through Nathan the prophet, that the building of the temple will have to wait.

But in response to David's heartfelt offer, God promises to build David a "house" – a kingdom that would last forever. The Davidic covenant promises that one day a descendant of David will sit on an everlasting throne.



This Wonderful Counselor, this Everlasting God, this Prince of Peace will be born in Bethlehem – the city of David – from the line of David. The righteous king will fulfill the first covenant promise of a seed from Abraham and will one day also fulfill the Mosaic promise to one day make God's people into a holy nation.

For roughly the next 1000 years the people of Israel would struggle to live into the covenants and the commands that called them to live in right relationship with God. Persistent failure to live according to God's covenant requirements would lead to exile and to the destruction of the temple. The exile of the nation and the demise of the monarchy had to be overcome for God's creation plan to be realized. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel would speak of a change in the nature of the covenant. In the interim between the Davidic covenant and its fulfilment, they both prophesy of a time when there will be a fundamental change in the taking place in the covenant community.

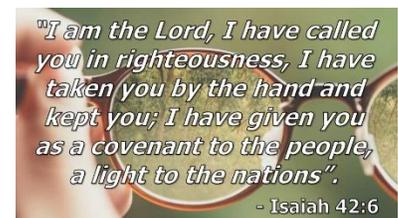


The new covenant will continue with the earlier covenant formula: *"I will be their God, and they will be my people"* - but in a new way. Jeremiah speaks of the people internalizing the Torah, or the word of God. It will be written on their hearts. Ezekiel speaks of a spiritual surgery and a radical transformation that will take place. In their own way, both speak of an inner renewal that will result in the ideal human-divine relationship. Next week we will further explore this idea as we delve into the final covenant, the new covenant established by, in, and through Jesus Christ. But now I invite you to turn to Isaiah 42 as we explore this passage in light of the Old Testament covenants.



Understanding the four Old Testament covenants allows us to better understand the implications of our key verse for today. In Isaiah 42, verse six, we read: *"I am*

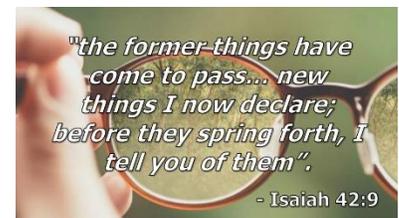
the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations". In the covenants established with Noah and Abraham and



Moses, God showed the people that they are to be righteous as God is righteous. God identifies the Israelites as God's people and took them by the hand, implying a special relationship with these people. And God has kept them – we see that in God preserving Noah and family on the ark, in God guiding Abraham to the promised land and giving him and Sarah a child, and in God leading and providing during the time of Moses in the wilderness. When God tells the Israelites that he has given them as a covenant to the people, God is saying that he has set them apart, to be the example of how all people of the earth are to

live in relationship with God. When God calls Israel to be a *"light to the nations"* we read Jesus into the statement. God is telling the nation of Israel that he expects all that is implied in the covenants to be lived out for the world to see. In verse seven we lean even more into the Jesus imagery, into the covenant that we will turn to next week. In verse seven we read these Messiah words: *"to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness"*. Jesus will come as the fuller revelation of God, doing these things and more. That is where the first four covenants are leading to. The God of the Israelites, the God of Noah and Abraham and Moses and David, will bring forth one who gives sight to the blind and brings people out of their darkness. In the incarnate Jesus we see a God who becomes not only physically present but who will remain with humanity in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The new covenant will usher in a much different human-divine relationship indeed. In verse nine, God says, *"the former things have come to pass... new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them"*. As we continue over the course of the next few weeks, we will hear what God had to say about this new thing. As the Israelites lived as the chosen people of God, living within the old covenants, the circle remained pretty closed. The covenants and the laws that supported covenantal living were intended to make and keep the Israelites a people set apart. These things have come to pass. The new thing lies ahead.



Join us again next week as begin to explore that new thing – the new covenant found in Jesus Christ. The circle will begin to expand as God’s love walks among humanity, bringing sight to the blind, opening deaf ears, loosing chains that bind – living right here among us. The divine-human relationship shifts as God comes to life in the person of Jesus. We remain God’s chosen people, beloved of our creator. As such, may we go forth this week, seeking to be God’s love in the world. May it be so. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. How does a better understanding of the Old Testament covenants help you live out your 21st century faith?
- 2) Pray. As we consider the “new” thing that God does in Jesus Christ, what do you hope to deepen in your faith? Pray for God to be at work!
- 3) Serve. Isaiah 42 speaks of being “a light to the nations”. How can you be the light for another in the week ahead?