

All Things New | How the Incarnation Changes Everything

A New Covenant

Jeremiah 31.18-22, 31-34; Ezekiel 36.23-27; 1 Corinthians 11.25

12.7.14 (Advent TWO)

(Jeremiah) "I have surely heard Ephraim grieving, 'You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for You are the LORD my God. For after I turned back, I repented; and after I was instructed, I smote on my thigh; I was ashamed and also humiliated because I bore the reproach of my youth.' "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a delightful child? Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him, I certainly still remember him; therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him," declares the LORD. "Set up for yourself roadmarks, place for yourself guideposts; direct your mind to the highway, the way by which you went. Return, O virgin of Israel, return to these your cities. "How long will you go here and there, O faithless daughter? For the LORD has created a new thing in the earth-- a woman will encompass a man."

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³ "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ "They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

(Ezekiel) "I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD," declares the Lord GOD, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. ²⁴ "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

(1st Corinthians) In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

Today is the Second Sunday in Advent, the season that prepares us to celebrate the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

And in our Advent Sermons this year, we're looking at HOW the Advent of God in Jesus Christ, how the incarnation makes things NEW. Last week we introduced the categories of New and Old and saw how the Gospel enables us to look at time in a particular way – we become fixated on the past and ALSO absorbed in the future. We become Ancient Infants – treasuring the old promises and living in perpetual anticipation of the New Thing God is doing.

Last week the New Thing – THIS week the New Covenant: it's a big word in the Bible. It's not a word we use in our daily lives much but it's found over 300 times in the Bible and as we'll see, it's a loaded term and the weightiest kind of idea... AND the thought that God is somehow setting aside His covenant or abrogating it (nullifying or fulfilling) it and putting a New Covenant in place had to be... shocking to the Hebrew reader who sees that idea in the Prophets.

So let's look at this scandalous idea, this announcement in the Prophets of a New Covenant: #1 – What's COVENANT? # 2 – What's NEW? and # 3 – What NOW?

In our own generation this idea of Covenant as being a central UNIFYING idea of the whole Bible Story was the focus of a great book by a man named O. Palmer Robertson. And in his book on the idea, he offers a very simple definition – “a bond, in blood, sovereignly administered”. It's such a towering work and so very highly regarded among modern theologians that you sort of expect a long, lofty, hard-to-understand definition but it's less than ten words: A Bond, In Blood, Sovereignly Administered.

It's an agreement/bond and as such it involves relationship between two parties. It could be a treaty. It could be a border/boundary established. It could be a marriage... it's a bond, a pledge, a vow that connects two parties and binds them to one another.

And when Dr. Robertson added, “a bond IN BLOOD” he meant that THIS is life-and-death-serious. It's not a kind of flexible arrangement. It's not like selecting a dry-cleaner or a barber (and you know I do have a relationship, of sorts, with my barber but if I leave Sal's...it's not gonna cost me my LIFE). And that's a big difference between a modern American commercial arrangement and an ancient Semitic covenant – these covenants are NOT gimmicks or relationships based on consumer rights or feelings - they're unbreakable EXCEPT by death – IN BLOOD.

A while ago we were looking at ways to help our small group leaders get better participation from their members and one book suggested what they called a “Group

Covenant” and ...I thought, “Uh uh!” That’s a gross misuse of that SOLEMN, weighty word. We can’t just USE it...as a promo device.

The actual words IN HEBREW for making or entering a covenant (a bond IN BLOOD sovereignly administered) – in Hebrew it’s literally “to cut a covenant”. That’s the word used here in Jeremiah 31 and sometimes IN the Hebrew Scriptures it doesn’t even USE the word “covenant” it just says “cut”. And the reader knows that means a life-and-death bond was made between two parties.

And IN the Bible when God cuts a Covenant, “a bond in blood” it is also sovereignly administered, i.e. God sets the terms of this BOND. It IS a relationship... but the parties are NOT equal... God doesn’t negotiate the terms. He determines the terms.

And THIS is where it gets...TENSE...because even though this IS a relationship...God is ...GOD.

And God’s non-negotiable TERMS are that He be acknowledged, in the Covenant, for who He IS. He will not and CANNOT be false...cannot be a Buddy or “the man upstairs” or a kind of “high-power consultant whose opinion really matters”. No.

He must be TRUE to WHO HE IS – and He IS NOT a man, not an equal partner. He is the Creator and Master of all that is – the whole Universe is His.

And when He, in the Torah, in the Exodus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, when He enters into a Covenant with His people and gives them all these conditions and rules and LAWS... and then Moses, the agent/mediator/go-between asks the people, “How ‘bout it people?” AND it says (Ex 24.7), “Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said...

And IF you KNOW the Bible...YOU put your fingers in your ears and you wince... YOU internally plead, “Don’t do it you fools!” and then you read the words... “and the people said ... "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!"

And you think...if you understand anything about “Covenant”...you know, “THIS is NOT going to end well”... BUT on the other hand...what are the people supposed to DO? God is approaching them and they are in NO position to negotiate... God requires they treat Him as God...and yet ...they... canNOT...even though they say they WILL (what else can they say?)

The whole Bible is the story of people who are required to OBEY the God who is GOD...and who fail again and again and again and again and break a covenant that can ONLY be broken on pain of death.

So...will God...change? Will He stop being GOD? Will He change the TERMS of the Covenant...make a NEW COVENANT? What is MEANT by that word, “new”? Did God somehow not KNOW that it would go so badly...that people would fail so miserably?

Well...of course He knew...and from the very start we found hints that this Covenant of Perpetual Frustration would be superseded and that God would not Himself change...would NOT erase the covenant but would fulfill it.

In Genesis 15 when God makes Abraham SIT and watch a covenant cutting ceremony...and Abraham is TOTALLY passive. Animals are cut in pieces and God, the Sovereign of the Covenant, YHWH passes through the CUT carcasses...and He is symbolizing, “If I break this Covenant, I will be UNDONE...I will be cut... BUT ALSO, IF YOU break this Covenant I will be UNDONE, I will be pierced and cut and broken IN YOUR PLACE...” God says, Ephraim My dear son? Is he a delightful child? Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him, I certainly still remember him; and My heart yearns for him...

And when Moses stands in the wilderness with those disobedient Covenant-breaker Israelites and God says, “Assemble a court, a legal proceeding. Call the elders to be a JURY...and I will stand before YOU (“But LORD, WE always stand before YOU, the lesser always stands before the Greater!”)... I will stand before YOU, Moses, I will stand ON THE ROCK...I will stand in the place of the Accused...and then Moses...take the ROD OF JUDGMENT (the fasces – the symbol of judicial authority) and STRIKE the ROCK where I stand...I will take YOUR judgment”

And when God became a MAN...He actually comes to stand in the place of the accused (as in Moses’ Day) and comes to be judged and undone, to be slaughtered and be CONDEMNED (as in Abraham’s Day).

In other words, God, from the start, planned to show that He IS indeed God to whom we owe all our obedience AND He also planned to ACTUALLY fulfill the Covenant on behalf of His frustrated, failed, unfaithful people. He always planned to satisfy the demands of the bond in blood sovereignly administrated, not to erase the first covenant but to

accomplish OUR part...to become Human in order to complete what WE failed to do...what WE FAIL and continue to fail (present tense) to DO.

So, what does this MEAN in the NOW – what now? Five implications or results from this New Covenant:

#1 - Our obedience is STILL required but now empowered. The Law was not only powerless to prevent sin; the law seemed even to provoke sin.

“What was Humpty Dumpty doing up on that wall in the first place?” I’ll tell why he was there: it was because someone told him it was forbidden! And that’s what the law seems to do – forbid it and all the sudden it’s all we can think about! All parents know how this works! That kid NEVER thought about putting a knife in a light socket til you told him not to do it!

The LAW functions on the basis of fear and fear just doesn’t have the power to save us from sin. But grace and the New Covenant in Jesus Christ’s blood, this writes the law on our hearts, i.e. it begins to change the motivational structure. Little by little our obligations become our passion.

2 – The New Covenant doesn’t mean that God is MUSH! He doesn’t get rid of the conditions as if to say, “Well maybe it’s NOT important that I be God... maybe WHO I AM doesn’t matter after all...maybe I am just the man upstairs...” NO WAY!

He fulfills His own demands. He vindicates His own holiness. “I came NOT to abolish the Law but to fulfill it”, said Jesus Christ.

3 – Repentance is a gift that brings the grace of God into our motives. The first section is one of many, many texts that connect repentance to joy and progress in the spiritual life. Practice faith and repentance – it’s NOT hard work that changes our hearts, it’s GRACE...and you get New Covenant grace by repenting and believing, repenting and believing...

4 – We have to get used to the paradoxical identity that is OURS in the present. It’s a tension and you see it in the start of the text. Israel is called in v. 21 “O Virgin of Israel” and in the next verse, “O faithless daughter” – well which one is it: is she a virgin or a prostitute? Answer YES!

As we've learned to say around here, "Cheer up you're much worse than you think you are (O faithless daughter!) and cheer up (O Virgin Israel) in the New Covenant, IN Jesus Christ living the obedient life FOR you and taking your judgment, and in defeating death – that makes YOU the delight of God's eye...more secure, embraced, perfect than you ever dreamed ("Justus et simul peccator").

5 – Here in the celebration of the first Advent we're looking BACK but also looking forward to the Second Advent. We know, if we're at all honest, that we are all struggling with obedience. And often it looks like IF the Law is written on my heart at all, it's with very light #3 pencil... Grace seems to be changing me...but if I'm open about it...changing this heart of stone VERY slowly...but at the Second Advent...in a moment...in the twinkling of an eye...we shall be changed...Then I will FULLY delight in what is good, true and beautiful...soon...and very soon...

If...of course...you have entered this New Covenant... and the only way to do that is "Set up for yourself roadmarks, place for yourself guideposts; direct your mind to the highway, the way by which you went." In other words, see that YOU are not better than WE...you're just as sinful and in need of grace as I am and as these Christians are...Go to the road where the Cross stands...outside of Jerusalem on a trash-heap; face your sin and look to God's solution.

Look at these strange words at the end of the first paragraph: "For the LORD has created a new thing in the earth -- a woman will encompass a man."

Women, in the ancient world, NEEDED protection ...and the Hebrew word for man can be translated "vigorous man or warrior. Here's a woman who gives shelter to a man. I take it to mean that the Church, the New Jerusalem offers refuge to those who THOUGHT they were strong but who will admit that they are weak... (Dylan: "Come IN she said I'll give ya', shelter from the storm!") Come on, the Church of the New Covenant offers you Refuge...and OUR Refuge is the God who became a Man...join us.