

Second Sunday of Lent

March 17, 2019

*Genesis 17:1-7,15-16: **"It's About What God Does ... Embraces"***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Nine times throughout the verses of our Old Testament lesson God speaks of “my covenant.” Now, when we think of a covenant, we tend to think of something like a contract. Whenever we enter into a contract, we think of two sides. In very simple terms: “you do your part, and I’ll do mine.” And then, we “sign on the ole dotted line,” as we like to say it. However, God’s covenant is *not* a contract.

The covenant that God makes in Scripture is not a covenant between two equal parties by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, it is one-sided. God is the one who establishes it. He sets the terms, and those who are connected to the covenant are purely receptive. We receive the benefits which God obligates himself to bestow. He must do it all. Even when God attaches commands, certain marks, places, times, or ceremonies to his covenant, these are always designed for the purpose of fulfilling the covenant for those who are to receive its benefits. **It’s About What God Does . . . He Embraces!**

The term “covenant” is a loaded term, the details of which are far too great to somehow capture in a sermon like this. While we may not use the word “covenant” frequently in the church, as we probably should, we are nevertheless talking about it and living in it all the time. Prayerfully, I can sharpen the focus so we can get to the “nitty-gritty” of our Old Testament lesson. So, pardon the necessary side trip.

The ceremonial and spiritual high point of the Old Testament was the feast of Passover; and in the New Testament it is the Lord’s Supper. In these two feasts, especially as the one merges into the other, the covenant of blood is revealed in its fullest clarity and beauty. The words that Jesus spoke on the night when he celebrated the Passover says it all (Luke 22:20), “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” If this cup is the *new* covenant of the blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, then there has been a blood of the *old* covenant. We live in the age where the new fulfills the old and abolishes it. With the flow of the new covenant blood of Christ, the old covenant flow of the blood of animals must come to an end.

It was the old covenant Passover that Jesus was celebrating for the last time with his disciples in the Upper Room at Jerusalem. The feast had been instituted by God himself, to be kept throughout the ages of Israel forever, a memorial of the mighty and gracious deliverance of God’s people from their slavery in Egypt. During the Passover meal, Jesus institutes the new covenant feast that is to be done in remembrance of him for the remission of sins. What brings us to our Old Testament lesson for this morning are these words that Jesus spoke at the establishment of the new covenant. He says, “Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it *new in the kingdom of God* (Mark 14:25).”

Part of the covenant of blood involves what Jesus calls “the kingdom of God.” And here comes an end to our side trip. The Passover was a conquering of Egypt and Pharaoh, both a picture of slavery to sin, death and the devil, and the deliverance of Israel to be as the Lord says in Exodus 19:6, “and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” In the Lord’s Supper, Christ talks of drinking anew in the kingdom of God, and we should add to that the words of Peter in his first epistle (2:9), “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the

excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Every kingdom needs a king. John writes: “Then Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice (John 18:37).”

Part of the covenant is the establishment of a kingdom and her king. We should know this by virtue of the fact that after the fall into sin it says in Genesis 3:15 that the offspring of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. Philip Melanchthon astutely observes: “there is added in this verse a brief description of the reign of Christ, that it is in the future, that the seed of the woman is going to crush the head, that is, the kingdom, of the serpent; that is, that he will destroy sin and death (*Treasury of Daily Prayer*, pg. 34).” Our Old Testament lesson is a place where the covenant is powerfully clarified as it is passed on to Abraham and Sarah.

God has chosen Abraham and Sarah to be the recipients of the covenant. It says that God will make from them nations and kings. Those nations and kings are all those of the covenant who are counted as “a royal priesthood,” as I already mentioned. What can it mean that we are royal other than that we are co-heirs with the King of kings? As we are kings with crowns, we reign with him in his victory. Because he first ripped open the curtain and passed by the cherubim with their flashing swords into the new paradise, we also have access to the same paradise - into the presence of God.

What is crucial about our lesson is when it says to Abraham, “I will give you a son by her.” This son is Isaac, and even more, the ancestor of the Savior according to his human nature. The Scriptures also reveal that he is the very Son of God who will be King of kings forever and will rule the universe for the salvation of his people. And because he has chosen us and made us his own, we rule the universe with him by our prayers according to his will, and in the day of perfection what request from us will he refuse? All of our requests will be perfect and granted. It is through the line of Isaac that all things will culminate in the person and work of Jesus and the new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. This is where it all starts. And he will drink it anew with us in eternity.

Are you beginning to see why we say of our lesson **It’s About What God Does . . . He Embraces?!** The new covenant comes by the blood of Jesus and a kingdom is established. My thoughts drift to the words of Matthew, “And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews (27:37).” He didn’t look like a king, but with the offering of his body and the shedding of his blood, the victory was obtained at the cross. Listen carefully to the words of the *Large Catechism*. Luther powerfully writes:

What is the kingdom of God? Answer: Simply what we learned in the Creed, namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to teach us this through his holy Word and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power (pgs. 426-427).

It is in the covenant, the shedding of the blood, the conquering of sin, death, and the devil, that leads to consider this kingdom and King who takes us to “righteousness, life and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience.” It is where our champion comes to rescue the one he loves eternally from all her enemies. As it says in Proverbs 8:3, “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me!” If that love doesn’t cause our hearts to leap for joy, I can hardly imagine what will. Look at the amazing tenderness of our King who supports our head and puts his arms around us! **He embraces!**

In just a few moments, we are going to be singing the post-sermon hymn: “*A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth.*” It’s a hymn that has been around for a long time. Be sure to pay close attention to the last verse when you are singing it. It says it all:

Lord, when Your glory I shall see
And taste your kingdom’s pleasure,
Your blood my royal robe shall be,
My joy beyond all measure!
When I appear before Your throne,
Your righteousness shall be my crown;
With these I need not hide me.
And there, in garments richly wrought,
As Your own bride shall we be brought
To stand in joy beside You.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott