

Wilderness Wisdom – Covenant Promises©

Exodus 6:1-8; 20:1-16; Matthew 5:17-18 March 26, 2017

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One of the most relevant themes in the Bible is Covenant. From very early on we find that God wants to make covenant promises with his creation.

We read in Genesis 9, after God has destroyed the earth with a flood, saving only the one faithful man and his family – Noah, who followed God’s instructions and built that ark in spite of the ridicule he received – and saving two of each animal species, both male and female, God was sorry that he had done this. And he made a promise – a covenant.

God said, never again will I destroy the earth with a flood. And as a sign of that covenant – and a reminder to myself – I will put a bow in the sky. It will be a colorful rainbow and it will remind me of my promise. I will see it and will not destroy the earth again with water.

I find it interesting that God needed to give himself a reminder of his covenant promise. But when we read ahead and find all the times that the people are disobedient and rebellious, it’s no wonder God knew he was going to need a reminder.

And then there was the covenant promises with Abram, who was later named Abraham, which means “Father of Many Nations.” Here was one man in the land of Ur whom God spoke to and called to start out in faith, leaving his country and most of his extended family, taking his wife, Sara and his brother in law, Lot and his livestock and off they went just following where God led.

And God told Abram that he would be Abram’s God and Abram and his descendents would be God’s people.

That was the covenant. There was nothing to do but follow the call. And the rest of that covenant was that there would be as many descendents as there are stars in the sky. Abraham and Sara, both at a very old age had a hard time believing that one. But God did keep his promise.

So, we now fast forward to the Scripture passages for today. In the first one, we read in Exodus where God speaks to Moses about the horrible situation of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt.

God tells Moses about the covenant he made with Abraham and his descendents and he says he is remembering that covenant and he is now going to do something about this situation.

God promises to set the people free from bondage and to take them as his own people and that he, Yahweh will be their God.

Unfortunately, the people were so beaten down and had been for so long, they did not listen to Moses or believe what he was telling them. And we already know from the

wilderness wisdom lessons we've been looking at that it took the freed Israelites a long time to begin to trust in the Lord. Like 40 long years to learn to trust and be shaped into the people God chose as his own.

Again, so far, there is no two party part to this covenant. It is God's promise to rescue and to be their God. That is the covenant. That is the promise. God has chosen them and that's that.

Ah, but God will discipline them as well. Over the years they have hard lessons to learn. But what is love really, especially the love of a parent for a child, without discipline? How do we learn and grow? How can we be shaped into the person God intends us to be without discipline when we stray, when we are disobedient?

And the people certainly did stray. They complained, they doubted, they quarreled, they were ungrateful for all that God had done for them already. And yet, God remained faithful to God's promise.

So, what is the definition of Covenant?

Of course, we are interested in what the biblical idea of covenant is. Back in the days of the Old Testament, when there were agreements made between kings, usually over land, a covenant was like a treaty. They would chisel out an agreement on stone and both parties agreed to the rules worked out and it was not to be changed. So in that case, covenant was like a treaty. It required agreement and things to do from both parties.

Those are bilateral covenants – that is, both parties agree and both have things to do. They are bound together by their agreement. The covenant of marriage is a bilateral covenant. Both parties agree to keep the vows made.

But it is not the same when God makes a covenant. God's covenants are unilateral. That is, God initiates, determines the conditions, and confirms his covenant with his people. The people are the recipients. They are not contributors. The people aren't expected to offer other parts to the bond of the binding together of the covenant. Humans are to accept the covenant as God offers it and we are to keep it as God demands; to receive the blessings that God assures, by oath to give.

God gives it, we receive it. The word for covenant in the Old Testament is *berith*. It really refers to a coming together, a being bound together, which is what God is intending in these covenants.

So now, we move on to the top of Mount Sinai with God's servant and prophet, Moses. Now God – Yahweh – is giving these rules for living. We know them as the Ten Commandments.

Do you think these ten rules are meant to be harsh and difficult for the people? What was God intending when he wrote these out in stone?

God had been leading these people now through the desert wilderness for a while. They were constantly having problems with trusting, with quarreling among each other and with Moses and Aaron, their leaders. They were even angry with God much of the time.

So God gives these Ten Commandments. Why? Surely it was to help the people live in peace. Surely it would help them to have a standard to go by so they would be happy. If we have no guidelines, no rules, then life is full of chaos and uncertainty, right?

Someone said, the other night in Bible Study that the Ten Commandments seem to be a broad expansion of the Golden Rule, that says: *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.* Matthew 7:12

The Golden Rule is a great little summary of how the Ten Commandments say we should live. I think there are other Scriptures passages that do the same.

The *Shema*, in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, speaks to the first part of the Ten Commandments where God says, *"You shall have no other gods before me." I am a jealous God.*

Shema, in Hebrew means *Hear*. *Shema, y'israel.* ⁴ *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* ⁵ *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

And of course, Jesus, using that as the greatest commandment, added on to it, saying a second commandment is like it: ³⁹ ... 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Matthew 22:39-40.

I have heard people say that after Jesus came; after he died on the cross to offer forgiveness of sins, we no longer have to live by the rules of the Old Testament laws, referring to the Ten Commandments.

Our doctrine as Christians is *Faith alone, Grace alone*; meaning it is not by our works, or good deeds, or being good enough that gives us salvation. Those things could not save us from our sin.

Our salvation comes through Jesus' shed blood on the cross. We are forgiven because of sheer grace and mercy. It is a free gift to us because God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us.

But Jesus says in Matthew 5 that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law. ¹⁸ *For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.* Not one iota will be crossed out.

Jesus isn't just referring to the Ten Commandments here. He is referring to all that was written in the first five books of the Old Testament – known to the Jewish people as the Pentateuch. It was and is their scroll – the book they love, as we love the Bible with the Good News of Jesus.

Jesus, the Messiah, who was promised through out the Old Testament came as the fulfillment of all that the prophets proclaimed. He is the fulfillment of all the good in the Ten Commandments, showing us how to live them; embodying those life rules to show it can be done and it is God's way for us so we will be happy and live within God's blessings.

So what does covenant mean to you? Where, in your life do you have covenants made?

If you are married, you have made a covenant in the vows you made. If you have adopted a child, you made a covenant to take that child as your own and to love her and there is nothing she or he is required to do but to belong and to enjoy your love and your heritage.

If you took out a loan to buy a house and land, you have made a different kind of covenant – more of a treaty. Fred and I have a covenant with Jeff, our landlord and with the association where we live. They promise to do certain things, and we agree keep their rules, as well.

But what does God's covenant with the chosen people – the Israelites – mean to you? Does it help you to know you belong to God? God initiated those covenants long ago, knowing that someday, years and years later, we would be a part of that special promise – that we – through the New Covenant – that is Jesus – would be God's people and He would be our God.

God knew from the very beginning of time that you would be here and that you would be His. He knew from the start that He would lead and protect and hold you in the palm of His hand. He knew everything about you when He first called Abram to follow him; when He first put that rainbow in the sky as a reminder to Himself that He would never destroy the earth with a flood.

You were have been on God's mind fro a very long time – for eons. You were part of His promise when He created the earth, the stars and humans – His beloved children.

Thanks be to God for His Covenant Promises and for the wisdom we see from the wilderness wanderings of Lent. They help us see how much we are loved. We see how faithful God has always been and is still today.

God says *I will be your God and you will be my people*. Trust in that great assurance. Great is the faithfulness of God, our heavenly Father. Amen.