
I don’t know about you, but I find it difficult to study familiar biblical texts. I guess I have pre-conceived notions and figure there is nothing new the Lord wants to say. My better self is aware that God’s revelation is bigger than my small bucket will hold, so I need to keep going back so God can keep on working on me!

This story of Noah has a happy ending (Genesis 9:15) and the rainbow is a symbol of that promise made by God. Interestingly, the Hebrew word we translate as “rainbow” is the same word that gets translated “bow.” Theodore Hiebert has observed that in choosing this sign of the covenant, God has turned a weapon of war and destruction (bow) into a mark of peace and fulfillment (rainbow).

The rainbow is a sign to let us know that God is remembering the covenant (Genesis 9:16); next week we shall look at a sign God gives to help God’s people remember the covenant (Genesis 17:1-14).

The text calls this promise of God a “covenant” (Genesis 9:16). The overall theme for the next few months is “covenant.” The Hebrew word is beri’ith. One literal meaning of the word is “pressing flesh together” (a handshake to make an agreement!); another root of the word suggests “cutting,” as one might select and cut down a tree. The covenant is God’s agreement; the covenant is God’s selection of a people.

God’s love is inclusive. Note that the covenant covers all of God’s creatures (Genesis 9:16-17). If God had asked me, I could have provided God with a list of people I might like to leave out of the favor of God. It doesn’t work that way! If God loves my enemy, the burden of proof is on me to show why I shouldn’t also love that one. (And I don’t think my logic is going to convince God to stop loving!)

One other thing. The first thing Noah does after stepping off the ark (Genesis 8:15-18) is build an altar (Genesis 8:20). God gives us new beginnings and the best way to make that fresh start is by worshiping God. Amen to that!

What Someone Else Has Said:
Chrysostom—fourth century bishop—(Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament I, InterVarsity) said: “God’s purpose, therefore, was to eliminate all apprehension from Noah’s thinking…”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “We give You thanks, O God, for the signs of Your grace and mercy in giving us new beginnings…”

September 10, 2017 Text: Genesis 17:1-14 “Signs that Bind”

Last week, we looked at the rainbow as a sign that God is remembering the covenant between God and God’s people (Genesis 9:16-17). In this week’s lesson, we explore a sign that God’s people were called to offer, as a symbol of the reality of God’s acceptance of them (Genesis 17:11).

Students of the Bible recognize that God inspired more than one writer of what is now in one book, Genesis. The author of last week’s study text is called “Yahweh” because that writer calls God “Yahweh.” In this week’s lesson, the writer is called “the priestly writer,” because this one speaks of the rituals and duties of a priest. (This writer refers to God as “El Shaddai,” usually translated as “God Almighty,” although it literally means “God of the Mountain.”)

God’s covenant with God’s people calls for all kinds of changes. (What changes does God want from me?) For example, the key leader has a name change. Instead of “Abram” (exalted ancestor), he will be named “Abraham” (ancestor of a multitudes). This signifies God’s intent to use Abraham as the founding seed of multiple generations who will know El Shaddai to be their God (Genesis 15:5-7).

The circumcision of every male was to be a sign of that covenant between God and Israel (Genesis 17:9-10). The Christian Church has accepted Jesus’ command to baptize (Matthew 28:19) and the New Testament practice of baptism (Acts 16:15, Romans 6:3, 1 Corinthians 12:13) and sees this as the sign of God’s mark upon God’s family of faith. (If you have access to The United Methodist Hymnal, read the introductory material on p. 32, “Concerning the Services of the Baptismal Covenant.”)

In verses that follow this week’s study, we can see Abraham’s reaction to God’s promise that Abraham would be the father of ongoing generations. He laughed. I think a better translation might be “He guffawed” (Genesis 17:17).

Have I laughed at the promise made to me at my baptism? Have I laughed at the idea that God will be with me in all circumstances? Have I laughed at the thought that God has something for me to do as my part of the covenantal relationship? God has taken the first step. What now?

What Someone Else Has Said:
Thomas C. Oden (John Wesley’s Teachings, Volume 2, Christ and Salvation, Zondervan) has written: “A promise is implied in every commandment of God. What God commands, God offers sufficient grace to do.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, Your love is enough…”

September 17, 2017 Text: Exodus 31:12-18 “A Special Day”

Walter Brueggemann has written a book entitled Sabbath at Resistance. The world says “work,” and Sabbath says “rest.” The world says “I’m in charge,” and Sabbath says “God is in charge.” The world says “More is better,” and Sabbath says “Less is better.” The world says “I’m better than you,” and Sabbath says “We are equals.” The world says “Power is the way to get strength,” and Sabbath says “Refreshment and change of pace is the way to get strength.” Sabbath is indeed resistance to the demands and claims and authorities of the world.

A friend of mine shared Ellsworth Kalas’ report that by the time of Jesus, there were 1,521 things that a person could not do on the Sabbath. Hmmm. When I was growing up, Sunday movies were off limits and I looked askance at anyone watering the lawn on the Sabbath.

One of my favorite family stories is about the time my mother was quite sick on Sunday morning and, much to her dismay and contrary to her life-long practice, she could not get to church. Around 11:30 AM, there was a knock at the door. Slowly, she made her aching way to the door. “Good morning, madam,” the oh-so-friendly young man with a cross pinned to his lapel, said, “We are doing a survey. Can you tell me why you are not in church?” My dear mother—blest her heart, as we say in the South—replied, “Yes, as soon as you tell me why you are not in church.”

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According to this week’s text, God takes Sabbath matters very seriously—life and death seriously (Exodus 31:14-15). The Hebrew word for this kind of death is ה*מְתָכֹת. The word can mean either physical or spiritual death...or both. It can be used as a figure of speech. No matter which interpretation we put upon ה*מְתָכֹת in this setting, it is a clear signal that in every sense, observing the Sabbath is God’s intent for humankind and observing the Sabbath is essential for the well-being of humankind.

Sabbath is about creating a rhythm of life (Exodus 31:15). Sabbath is a reminder that God is the Creator (Exodus 31:17). Sabbath is the way that God makes God’s people holy (Exodus 31:13). Sabbath is a reflection of the holy creator God (Exodus 31:14). Sabbath is a sign of taking God seriously (Exodus 31:13).

What Someone Else Has Said:
In the foreword to Matthew Sleeth’s 24/6 (Tyndale), Eugene Peterson observed: “Sabbath is simply presented not as a rule to be kept but as a freedom to enter into.” Sleeth wrote: “Sabbath is a time of transition from human doings to human beings.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Slow me down, Lord...”

The prophet Ezekiel reports that the Lord has said some rather, uh, negative things about God’s people, Israel: degraded God’s name (Ezekiel 36:22,23), dishonored God’s name (Ezekiel 36:23), your pollution (Ezekiel 36:25), your idols (Ezekiel 36:25), your uncleanness (Ezekiel 36:29), the shame of famine (Ezekiel 36:30), your evil ways (Ezekiel 36:31), your no-good deeds (Ezekiel 36:31), sinful and detestable practices (Ezekiel 36:31). Israel is invited to feel disgust (Ezekiel 36:31), shame and humiliation (Ezekiel 36:32). Thus endeth the lesson!

If we were in charge, most of us would be ready to wipe our hands clean of such miserable excuses for faithfulness. It is not likely that I would want anything to do with anyone who fit Ezekiel’s description of Israel (unless, of course, I fit that description)!

But notice how God moves in this situation! It is clear that God is not making believe that everything is okay with the way Israel has lived out the covenant. Just look at those words—degrading, dishonoring, pollution, unclean, shame, evil, no-good, sinful, detestable—should make it obvious that God is calling it as it is, dirty laundry and all.

God is, however, a God of new beginnings. Clean water. Cleanse. New heart. New spirit. (Ezekiel 36:25-26). To the very ones who least deserve it, God offers a fresh start. To the very ones who have denied God, God gives affection. God keeps God’s end of the covenant, even when God’s people have turned away. The text says that God does this in order to show that God is faithful (Ezekiel 36:22), thus restoring honor to God’s name, the very honor that Israel had diminished by its sinful behavior (Ezekiel 36:22, 32). “Not for your sake” is the way the text puts it; in other words, “You don’t deserve this gift of grace.”

It is not just any old gift that God gives; it is the gift of God’s spirit (Ezekiel 36:27). When God’s Spirit dwells in us, we are able to walk in keeping with God’s will (Ezekiel 36:27). Knowing how far we have been from God’s will leads us to shame and humiliation (Ezekiel 36:32). Let’s call that “repentance.” Hmmm. Didn’t someone else talk about repentance? Try Matthew 3:2.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Randy Maddox (Responsible Grace, Kingswood Books) has penned: “(Wesley) turned to a distinction between two aspects of repentance...a thorough conviction of sin, an entire change of heart and life.” ... In this way he hoped to make clear that repentance prior to justification was not a human initiative but a response to God’s gracious prevencence in awakening....(and then) an entire change of heart and life."

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me...”

Is That You God?
There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer, and he started his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just starting at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Once again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave but before he had gone more than a few steps; he turned around, ran back to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever. When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, “What did you do today that made you so happy?” He replied, “I had lunch with God.” But before his mother could respond, he added, “You know what? She’s got the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen!”

Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, “Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?” She replied, “I ate Twinkies in the park with God.” But before her son responded, she added, “You know, he’s much younger than I expected.”

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. People come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Embrace all equally! —Kathy Pinto

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