

biblestudy: january 2020

Belton Joyner, Jr.

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

January 5, 2020 Text: Genesis 15:1-20 "God's Covenant with Abram"

You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." That's the kind of agreement we usually make with others. But take a look at Genesis 15:18. In this covenant, God is the only one who promises to do anything.

That is hard to take. Don't we want to deserve the gifts of God? For that reason, some of us measure our relationship with God by how detailed we can be in keeping the laws of God. But God insists on loving us anyhow! As Charles Wesley wrote, "Sudden expired the legal strife, 'twas then I ceased to grieve; my second, real, living life I then began to live" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, stanza three, hymn 58).

Abram believed God would deliver on God's promise (Genesis 15:6) even though he was not sure just how the Lord would do it (Genesis 15:2). God counted Abram's response as righteousness (New Revised Standard Version), high moral character (Common English Bible) (Genesis 15:6), not because of what Abram did, but because of how Abram believed what God would do.

"God made a covenant with Abram" (Genesis 15:18). Covenant is an important concept in the Bible; the word appears over three hundred times in the Old Testament alone. The Hebrew word is *b'riyth*. There were understood to be two kinds of covenants: one in which the parties

were equal and one in which one party was deemed superior to the other. In this covenant (Genesis 15:18), God is the superior party. In a sense, the promises are a one way street: God is doing the promising and God is doing the fulfillment of the promises.

The covenant made at Sinai (the Ten Commandments) is one in which the responsibility of humankind is stressed (Deuteronomy 29:13-14). The covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:18) is one in which God's promise and work is emphasized.

As the new year begins, how will I live if I believe God has promised to be with me throughout the year? How will I relate to others if I trust that God is with me? How will life be different if I believe that God makes good on God's promises?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Frederick A. Norwood (*Young Reader's Book of Church History*, Abingdon) wrote: "We don't earn the right to God's love and grace. We don't earn faith. Faith is a gift from God."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Thank You, Lord, for making good on Your promises..."

January 12, 2020 Text: Ruth 1:1-18; 4:14-20 "Ruth's Covenant with Naomi"

For some reason, I have had a hard time getting started on this week's lesson. The Book of Ruth is a familiar story. It has those verses often sung at weddings (Ruth 1:16). The characters are quickly recognized: Ruth, Naomi, Boaz. But, for me, it just sort of sat there.

I read about how Jewish texts and Christian texts place the Book of Ruth in differing orders in the Old Testament. Mildly interesting. I reflected on the significance of same gender relationships. Seems like a side trip. I imagined a movie made of Ruth and Boaz's romantic journey. Pass the popcorn.

Then, it dawned on me. As we say, I had been putting the em-PHA'sis on the wrong Syl-LA'-ble. Let's come at these verses through the eyes and heart of Naomi: Naomi who lost her husband and her sons to early deaths (Ruth 1:3-5) ... Naomi who tried to do what was best for each of her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:8) ... Naomi who respected the traditions of the non-Jewish Moabite people (Ruth 1:15) ... Naomi who swallowed her pride when Ruth insisted on going with her (Ruth 1:18) ... Naomi who found a way to feed her family (Ruth 2:2) ... Naomi who continued to look out for her daughter-in-law (Ruth 2:22) ... Naomi who provided a home for Ruth (Ruth 2:23) ... Naomi who used smart business sense to help Ruth (Ruth 4:5) ... Naomi who becomes a grandmother and a nursemaid (Ruth 4:16) ... Naomi who becomes a link in the ancestry of King David (Ruth 4:17).

January 19, 2020 Text: 2 Samuel 7:1-17 "God's Covenant with David"

Let's be honest about it: Most of us do not get as specific a revelation of God's plans as David got (2 Samuel 7:1-17). In these verses, God (through the prophet Nathan) goes through all the ways God has been with David from the days David was a shepherd boy (2 Samuel 7:5). And then, God describes all the ways David will be blessed in the future (2 Samuel 7:12-16). But, what about us?

Think about it this way. When I go to the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, I always enjoy going down that side hallway in the East Building where they display art projects by school children from North Carolina. The last time I was there I saw a fascinating exhibit, done by fifth graders in Charlotte, if I remember correctly. The students had been discussing how various colors reflect or symbolize various feelings: red might represent anger; blue might describe peace; black could depict power; yellow could tell about uncertainty; green might show growth. Then, each class member was to do a painting, creating rectangular designs that told which feelings they had that day.

Isn't that the way it works lots of times? The one who works in the background is the one who gets things done. We might say, God uses the supporting cast as much (or more) as the stars of the show.

Sometimes I have failed to take action because I figured I was more or less a nobody who could not really get anything done. This story is about a woman who offered her weakness and her uncertainties as tools for God to use. And look what happened! The account ends with a genealogical list that leads to Jesse, the father of David. This means, of course, that list continues to that birth in Bethlehem that gave new life to all (Matthew 1:16-17).

Do you suppose God can use the likes of us?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Bishop Kenneth Carder (*Living Our Beliefs*, Discipleship Resources) says: "Discipleship in the Methodist tradition is both an art and a craft. It includes passion born of God's grace and it involves practices and habits that form us in love for God and neighbor."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Use me, even me..."

Not a single painting was just one color. Each of the designs was a mixture, some more red than blue, some more blue than red; some with dominant green; one had the power of large black rectangles, but they were face-to-face with a giant stretch of the uncertainty of yellow. Every one of the paintings was different. No two people carried the same feelings on that day.

God is not a one-size-fits-all God. The covenant with David matched the history and the present and the days to come for King David. That same promise would not make sense for me. What does make sense is that God agrees to be on the journey with David (and with me and with you). What does make sense is that God makes a covenant with each of God's children, a covenant that has "yes" written by tomorrow. The perspective for seeing that "yes" is clearest when we stand by the empty tomb. God has the final word. (The signature on the covenant contract appears to be "Jesus Christ".)

continued on page 2

What Someone Else Has Said:

Tertullian, writing around the year 200, (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament IV*, Intervarsity Press) said: “That new dispensation, then, which is found in Christ now, will prove to be what the Creator then promised under the appellation of ‘the sure mercies of David,’ which were Christ’s. Inasmuch as Christ sprang from

David, or rather his very flesh itself was David’s ‘sure mercies,’ consecrated by religion and ‘sure’ after its resurrection.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord, for David, and thank You for the promise You make to me...”

January 26, 2020 Text: Jeremiah 31:31-37 “God’s Covenant with Us”

Tucked away in this week’s study text is a passing reference that is actually a key point in understanding God’s covenant with us. Go back and read Jeremiah 31:27 and Jeremiah 31:31. What jumps out at you?

Think about it: the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Going back to the days of 1 Kings 12:1-20, these two kingdoms had been divided, not trusting each other, not respecting each other, not sharing much of each other’s life. But now in this new covenant, God has put them together. What had been “overthrow, destroy, and bring evil” (Jeremiah 31:28) is going to become “to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 31:28).

God has enough love to go around! These tribes had been the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). God has enough love to go around! One tribe had its capital in Jerusalem; the other had its capital in Samaria. God has enough love to go around! The Lord looks at these human-created divisions and says, “I am making my covenant with both of you: Israel and Judah” (Jeremiah 31:27, Jeremiah 31:31). God has enough love to go around!

Alas, this leads me to ponder how we continue to divide up God’s people, suspecting that there might be more love for one than for the other. How do I feel about persons who have a different view than I do about human sexuality? How quickly do I assume the worst about someone of a race or ethnic background different than mine? What

“right belief” do I set into place as a requirement for being loved by God? And, lo and behold, God comes along and messes up my neatly divided world: Israel *and* Judah!

So, it seems that this week’s text is a call both to celebration and to confession. We celebrate the expansiveness and inclusivity of God’s love. We confess how we have failed to reflect our end of that covenant. This is a God of new beginnings (“The days are surely coming...” “The days are surely coming”—Jeremiah 31:27, 31). Praise the Lord! That is God’s new covenant with us!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Each in Our Own Tongue* (Abingdon), Alfredo Cotto-Thorner wrote: “In the Book of Acts, we were told that the disciples were to be witnesses of Jesus ‘to the ends of the earth.’ The future is full of uncertainty, difficulties, and challenges. But in spite of all this, the Lord will be with us here in this end of the earth to which we have arrived, so that we may continue to be his witnesses wherever we may be.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Savior, You have torn down walls that separated us; strengthen us to live together...”

