

Christmas Unwrapped: *Faithfulness* - Advent wk 1

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Nov. 29, 2020

Isaiah 49:8-10, 13, 15-16 NIV

8 This is what the Lord says:

“In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,
9 to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’
and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’

“They will feed beside the roads
and find pasture on every barren hill.
10 They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.
He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water...

13 Shout for joy, you heavens;
rejoice, you earth;
burst into song, you mountains!
For the Lord comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones...

15 “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast

and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!
16 See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands...

“I will not forget you!” is what God says to us. It’s painful to be forgotten or left behind, especially by someone who has promised to be there for you. Maybe a job ends or a relationship ends and you’re left wondering what it all meant if it could end. The pain we experience when a long relationship ends can be difficult. It can make us wonder, *“Can I really count on anyone? And if I can’t trust the people closest to me, then maybe I’m all alone in this world.”*

We can feel lost and alone when relationships don’t turn out the way we thought, or maybe it’s not relational, maybe it’s when we turn a corner in life and see no one else turns it with us. *“Am I the only one going through this?”* Maybe it involves moving to a new city, state, or country and we feel alone in this difficult journey through the world.

Times like these can make us feel lost and alone – perhaps even wondering where God is in the midst of life’s challenges and changes. In these times we need to be reminded of who God is and what He has done for us. We need to put some Christmas story truths into our hearts.

The season of Advent is a time when we stop and remember God with us and for us. We pause in the middle of our busy lives; we sit in the midst of all our hopes and longings; we pray and we contemplate God's promises. We can ask hard questions and look in God's Word for the answers. Answers about God's covenant faithfulness and promises.

We have a covenant with God in Jesus. Do you know what a covenant is? It's more than a promise or commitment. God has made a covenant with His people to be our God, to save us, to love us, to be with us, and the faithfulness of God guarantees this covenant. He won't break the covenant, even if we do for a time.

The whole story of the Bible tells us that God is faithful and serious about the covenant that God has made with us. Scripture tells us of this covenant in the story that begins in Genesis 15 with a man named Abram. God calls Abram to leave his homeland and his family, not knowing where he is going, and to trust God for the future. God makes a covenant with Abram, promising that He will give Abram a land to dwell in, that He will grant Abram many descendants, and that He will be their God. God promises to bless Abram's family and bring blessing to the world through his lineage.

Covenant is a word that's used often in the Bible, but it is a word that is never used lightly. It is reserved for formal agreements of a most serious nature involving elaborate

oaths and vows that must be taken to enter into the agreement. And get this, this isn't a contract, where if one side fails to fulfill it, then it is broken and ended. The kind of covenant God makes with people is that God will fulfill it, even if people fail to fulfill our part.

Let's make this distinction more clear. If you hire a contractor, you wouldn't want a covenant, you would want a contract. If the contractor does the work, then you pay and fulfill your part of the contract. A covenant would be if you said, *"Even if you do not do the work, I will pay you and fulfill my half of the covenant."*

When you build a house, you want a contract. But when you build a home, you want a covenant. You don't want a contract marriage, you want a marriage covenant that says, *"I will love, honor, and cherish you, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."* A covenant marriage means each person finds a way to love and serve even through the difficult times. It's only when a marriage is a covenant that husband and wife grow and mature together – the two become one.

In Genesis 15 God says, *"Abram, I make a covenant with you. I will bless you and your descendants, I will give you a land, I will be your God, and I will do something through your descendants that will bring blessing to all the world."* And Abram says to God, *"But God, I don't even have a real descendant, and already I'm an old man. How can I know that you will keep your promise?"*

How can I know that you will be faithful to the covenant that you're making with me today?"

So God instructs Abram to bring a heifer, a goat, and a ram; cut them in half; separate the halves with a space between. Abram obeys, and a strange thing then happens. Genesis 15:12, 17-18, ***As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep.... When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram...***

What's happening there? We're told God was making a covenant with Abram; and at that time in history, when two people joined together in a covenant, an elaborate ceremony was held. Animals would be sacrificed and cut in half and the people making the covenant would walk between the two halves.

The meaning was, *"May this be done to me, if I fail to keep the covenant."* Abram asked God how he could be sure God would keep the covenant and God essentially said, *"I would rather die than be unfaithful to the promise I make to you today."* If you think about covenant, it is not a contract. A contract says, *"If one side doesn't do their part, then the contract is broken."* Like hiring a construction contractor, if they don't do the work, they don't fulfill the contract, and they don't get paid. Right?

God doesn't make this type of contract with Abram, God makes a covenant. God doesn't say to Abram, *"I will love you as long as you make me happy."* God doesn't say, *"I will love you as long as you do everything right."* God doesn't say, *"I will love you as long as you don't fail me."* God is not a contract God.

God is a covenant making God. God says, *"I will remain faithful even if you are unfaithful. I will continue to love you even if you don't love me back."* Our God is a for-better-or-for-worse kind of God. And God's promise to Abram is the same to you: ***"I will love you and I will be faithful to you, even if it kills me."***

The story of the Old Testament is consistent with this. It is a love story of a faithful God and an unfaithful people. It would have been easy for God to say, *"Enough! I've given you all that I can give. I've loved you as long as I can love you."* And then walk away.

It would have been easy for God to do that if he were a contract God. But our God is a covenant God. Our God is a God who says, *"I will not forget my love for you, no matter what you do. Even though you walk away from me, I will remain true and faithful."*

Considering Christmas again, we celebrate a baby and a young mother and shepherds and wise men. But God has always known that Christmas is about something bigger.

Christmas is about keeping a promise. Christmas is about God's faithfulness to His covenant.

There are many benefits of Jesus coming into our world – all of them important. We needed to know more about God and how He wants us to live. Yes. But if that was the only reason for Christmas, Jesus could have come as a teacher and nothing more.

We needed God's healing power to bind up our broken places and heal our physical and emotional wounds. But if that had been the only reason for Christmas, Jesus could have come as a healer and nothing more.

We needed God's help to get along with one another and strengthen our relationships. But if that was the only reason for Christmas, Jesus could have come as a counselor and nothing more.

We needed God's help to help make the world a fairer and more just place. But if that was the only reason for Christmas, Jesus could have come as a prophet and nothing more.

But the problem goes deeper than that, we needed something more. When the angel appeared to Joseph to announce that Mary would have a child, he said, **"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins"** (Matthew 1:21). The name Jesus has significant meaning; it is

Hebrew for “the LORD saves.” “Yahweh to the rescue!” So when the angel proclaimed the news of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, he said, **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord”** (Luke 2:10-11).

The baby born that day was not a teacher, a healer, a counselor, or a prophet. Yes, Jesus was all those things, but when the angel had to pick one title – the most important title, the one that would give us God’s reason for the season, God’s reason for Christmas, he said, **“A SAVIOR has been born to you.”**

Jesus was born to be a Savior, and Christmas was God’s plan to bring Him into the world. Why? Because we desperately need a Savior. We can’t do it on our own, so God made a way to fulfill His covenant with us.

You see, when we were lost in our sins, when we had rebelled against God’s love, when we had rejected His mercy and His kindness, He became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ so that He could show us the depths of His love and faithfulness. Instead of walking away from us, He walked into our world to bear our grief and sorrows and paid the penalty of our sins so that we might be forgiven and made right with God who is faithful. Jesus’ gift to us at Christmas is a new heart and a new covenant with Him.

The good news of great joy that comes to us on Christmas Day is that God has made a way, and the way is Jesus our Savior.

Luke 2:11-14,

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Together this Christmas we celebrate and remember that Jesus is our Savior and we are His people forever. Amen.