

**Old Testament Lesson—Genesis 12:1-4**

*Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

**Old Testament Lesson—Genesis 9:8-17**

*Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

Before I jump into my message this morning, I want to start by noting how rare it is that we, the Church of Jesus Christ, focus exclusively on the Old Testament in worship. Both Scripture lessons come from the book of Genesis this morning.

I think it's unfortunate how seldomly we preach from just the Hebrew Bible—from what our Jewish siblings call the Tanakh.

Isn't it strange how rarely we do this? After all, these books—these ancient writings—would've been the Scriptures near and dear to Jesus' heart. They would've been considered holy to him—precious to him.

In his day, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John didn't exist. The writings of Paul had yet to be written! The thoughts and traditions that would eventually come together and form the New Testament were still developing—still in process.

So, for Jesus of Nazareth, the books of his Israelite ancestors—the Hebrew Bible, was the extent of God's revelation on earth. When considering God's grace and love and truth, Christ would think of Genesis and the Law of Moses. When thinking about God's faithfulness in the past, Jesus would reflect on the prophets, the psalms, and the wisdom literature.

I've said it before, and I'm sure I'll say it many more times. If it was important to Jesus, then it should probably be important to us, too.

We call it the “Old Testament.” But let’s remember: These texts were filled with good news for Jesus and his contemporaries. Yes, I daresay the Jews of Jesus’ day would’ve thought of those ancient sources as “gospel.”

If you were worshipping with us last week, then you know we started a new sermon series on “Bible basics.” Pastor Dave walked us through the two Creation stories in Genesis. Knowing God as our Creator is, of course, foundational—critical for understanding everything else that comes after.

But it’s also crucial to understand that God didn’t make us—didn’t create human beings on a lark or just for the fun of it—just because God *could*...far from it. We were created to be in relationship—created to be recipients of God’s boundless love.

Or, as one of the Church’s older faith statements puts it: Humanity’s chief end or purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. My friends, we were created for joy! We were made to reflect the love we were made with.

I mean, if that doesn’t sound like gospel—if that doesn’t sound like good news, then I don’t know what does! Friends, we were made for relationship! We’re born to create and maintain loving connection with others.

We know this to be true. Pastor Dave emphasized it last Sunday: We are made in the image of our Creator. And just as God is a relational God—Three in One—so, too, are we relational beings—meant to be in community. This is how we thrive.

Today, I want us to focus on the good news Jesus would’ve known and celebrated in his day—news just as good for us in 2024 by the way. I want to explore exactly how God comes to be in relationship with humankind.

The means by which God communes with us—the answer to how God relates to human beings (as Jesus would’ve understood it) can be described with one word: covenant.

God has established a covenant with us. God has covenanted with humanity. This is one of the most fundamental principles in the Bible. And, again, it was something Jesus and his ancestors not only cherished, but depended on. They relied on the covenant.

Now, a covenant may sound like some fancy, theological word that only pastors and scholars use. And I get it. It’s just not part of most people’s everyday vocabulary. But, I want to encourage you to get comfortable with it.

You can think of a “covenant” as a kind of special, holy promise. A covenant is similar to a contract. It approaches the idea of a legally binding agreement.

But what makes a covenant special—what makes it holy—is that it can’t be broken—can never be broken—even if the terms of the agreement are violated. If one of the parties breaks their promise, the covenant remains valid and intact.

Obviously, that’s not true with a legal contract. In that case, if one of the parties messes up and breaks their promise, the contract is dead. The relationship is broken, and the contract becomes null and void. Trust, then, becomes harder to establish going forward.

A covenant, on the other hand, is rooted in grace and built on forgiveness. And that reality makes a covenant stronger than any human contract.

When God made a covenant with Jesus’ ancestors, God did so fully prepared to bestow mercy—fully prepared to reestablish that covenant when God’s chosen people would, inevitably, break their promises.

The Bible is full of these holy agreements between God and the people God loves. We see them all throughout the first five books of Scripture, in particular. And several really important ones are found right here in Genesis.

Think of the agreement between God and the first humans, Adam and Eve. Take care of this garden, name these animals, but just don't eat the fruit of that one tree! Of course, Adam and Eve break their promise and are cast out of Eden. But the covenant God made to be with them and protect them remained. God continues to love and care for them.

God even does the same with their murderous son, Cain. Compared to Cain's sin, his parents' mistake seems rather quaint. Doesn't it? Cain is exiled, yet his Creator shows mercy to him too—promising to protect Cain wherever he goes.

The Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai—the revealing of the Torah to Israel is (of course) another major covenant tradition. More on that in the coming weeks.

But the covenant most think of when it comes to Genesis and the Old Testament is the one made with Abraham and Sarah. It's certainly the most consequential for our Jewish neighbors.

God instructs Abraham to, *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

It's hard to overestimate just how vastly important is God's relationship with Abraham. It even becomes one of the primary ways God chooses to self-identify: I am the God of your ancestors. I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob!

This is the covenant—the moment that ignited the story of God and Israel. This covenant would, eventually, include a sacramental marking of the flesh through circumcision—a visible sign that you belong to God—that you have been claimed and called by your Creator.

This is what the Apostle Paul raves about in his letters! His whole theology is based on the call of Abraham! We are saved by grace through faith (Paul says)—a faith in God's goodness and a profound trust in God's guidance—demonstrated long ago by Abraham and Sarah.

Here, in Genesis 12, God chooses a particular family and a particular people to form a relationship with. And God does this not because of some divine preference or favoritism, but so that *everyone* in the world might know their Maker and experience the deepest of loves.

And this, the most expansive of loves, comes from being in covenant relationship with the God of grace—the God who promises to never leave us nor forsake us.

But, to me, that's not even the best part. The call of Abraham and the covenant made with his family and descendants doesn't even begin to describe the fullness of God's mercies—doesn't begin to showcase God's deep desire to bring us into fellowship with the heavens.

We know this because, long before the time of Abraham, during the days of myth and legend, we find God establishing a covenant not with one particular people or ethnic group. No, we learn God dreamed much bigger than that. This promise goes even beyond human beings and extends to all living things!

In my view, it's the most inclusive promise God makes in Scripture because it isn't dependent upon our faith or behavior or capacity to understand or anything else except that we are made in the image of God and our lungs are filled with the breath of life.

It's a dream so big and so incredible—so monumental that God has to celebrate and decorate the skies with a symbol of the covenant—a rainbow whose spectrum of colors and beauty represent all that we are and all that we ever could be.

I find it reassuring that God enters into these holy agreements with both global humanity and with specific communities. Because, no matter where we come from, or what language we

speaking—no matter who we love or how our identities are expressed—no matter what we believe, we still share more in common as human beings than that which divides us.

And yet, at the same time, my “Johnny-ness” and your irreplaceable “you-ness” matters to the Lord. God loves us universally, corporately, as human beings. *And* God loves us personally—in our particularity, in our uniqueness—in our contextualized experience and cultural background. God loves your quirkiness! God adores your eccentric nature! God delights in your weird tastes in music and TV and everything else that makes you, you!

As we talked about last Sunday, after all, God *made* you—*all* of you—and proclaimed you not just good, but *very* good.

You see: God enters into covenant relationship with us knowing that we won’t always keep our word. And that’s okay. Because, to God, we’re worth it anyway.

You are worth it. You are. I promise! But more importantly, God has promised.

Amen.