

**STIRRING UP ADVENT:
RECIPES FOR RELATIONSHIPS
(1) GOD'S COVENANT**

Jeremiah 33:14-16

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November 29, 2009

PROLOGUE

True commitment is hard to come by these days.

The community orchestra conductor was almost out of his mind. At each rehearsal at least one member had been missing. At the last rehearsal, just before the big concert, he said, "I would like to thank the first violinist for being the only member of the orchestra to attend every rehearsal." The violinist smiled shyly but then humbly said to the conductor, "Well, it seemed the least I could do since I won't be at the concert tonight."

SCRIPTURE

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. {15} In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. {16} In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness" (Jeremiah 33:14-16 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

This is the first week of Advent, the start of a new Church Year. It is a time of preparation for celebrating the event that changed history--The coming of Christ into the world, commonly called Christmas. In his coming, Jesus brought tomorrow to us. He brought hope to a people mired in hopelessness. He brought light to those in darkness. He brought relationships back--relationships bonding God with his people, and a relationship between the many children of God, as well.

A healthy, fulfilling relationship with God and healthy, fulfilling relationships with one another are made possible through the events of Christmas as we see a Savior being born--a Savior who comes for a crucial reason: "To bring reconciliation" (Rom. 5:11). Reconciliation ... that is a relationship word--a word about healing between individuals, a word that brings promise to relationships ... hope, togetherness and tomorrows.

Jack and Judith Balswick have been professors in the Department of Marriage and Family

at Fuller Theological Seminary for over twenty-five years (since 1982). The Balswicks were there when I was doing my doctoral work and they are still going strong. They have authored many books including one called, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*. Although it is not an easy read, the book is a valuable resource on the meaning of family. However, for this series in Advent, I am primarily interested in the foundational principle behind the book. The Balswicks believe that God's relationship with us is a model for our relationships with one another. They write, "The establishment of a covenant between God and the nation of Israel has become the foundational focus in developing [an understanding] of the family" (p. 20; 2008 version).

The Balswicks describe four stages in the relationship between God and his people ... and between individuals: 1) Covenant; 2) Grace; 3) Empowerment; 4) Intimacy. Just as God's covenant is made possible because of grace, so our covenants with one another include grace as an essential component. These relationships develop into healthy relationships through empowerment and intimacy. We will look at grace, empowerment and intimacy later in this series. Our attention today is on covenant.

1. THE MODEL FOR COMMITMENT AND PROMISE

A covenant is meant to be an enduring relationship marked by commitment and promise. Marriage is an example of a covenant - two people are in a relationship based on the commitment and promises they have made to each other. God making covenants with his people and responding to them out of that covenant relationship is a major, unifying theme of the Bible. It is also the key to understanding what makes for a healthy, fulfilling relationship.

God's commitment to his people establishes a relationship where God is our God and we are his people (Ex 6:7). But he also makes a promise to redeem us from everything that stands in the way of forming that relationship. After Adam and Eve had turned away from God at the instigation of the Evil One, the Lord said, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." It was as if God was saying to them, "Though you have disappointed me terribly by what you have done, I promise you that I will restore this broken relationship between us by sending a Savior who will destroy the devil's work." Eve's offspring, a Savior, the promised Messiah, would crush the serpent's head; by his being wounded ... by his death on the cross ... Jesus would destroy sin, Jesus would be the death of death itself.

The promise of a Savior continued to be spoken to Abraham and David, stating that their descendant would bring about reconciliation between God and his people ... between nations ... between individuals. Jeremiah repeats the promise the Lord had revealed to him earlier in his ministry. The Lord promises a miracle: From David's offspring would

come the Messiah, the great and good King of his people. He would be called, "The Lord is our righteousness," because that is exactly what he would provide for us--righteousness; a right relationship with God.

As a descendant of David, he was to be human. If he had only been a mere human, he would not be righteous, due to his inability to live righteously. He would merely be what every human being is--a sinner. And so this Messiah would come from God, to be true God as well. He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a human parent, a young woman named Mary. Thus, he would be both true human and true God.

And, "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of children" (Gal. 4:4-5).

So we observe Advent. It is a time when we remember God's fulfillment of promise ... a promise to send a Savior ... A Savior who would live under the law, and fulfill that which we were unable to fulfill--all the requirements of God's Law. In his continued commitment to us, this Messiah would allow himself to be "bruised in the heal," as promised in Genesis, so that death itself might be forever defeated.

Jeremiah also says:

"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases" (Lam 3:22a).

"Steadfast love" is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*. *Hesed* is the kind of love which shows itself in loyalty and commitment. We sometimes refer to this as "covenant love." Long ago, the Scottish preacher George Matheson defined it as the kind of love that never, ever lets go.¹

This means we can count on God's presence. He will never leave or abandon his people. He is with us wherever we go. He has made an unconditional commitment to stand by us. The Apostle Paul tells us that even:

"If we are faithless, God remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2:13).

God's relationship with us is a model for all healthy, fulfilling relationships. Commitment

¹George Matheson penned the great hymn, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go" in 1882.

determines the nature of a relationship and promise determines the future of a relationship. A covenant includes both commitment and promise. A marriage covenant starts when two people make a commitment to be married and promise to stay together for the rest of their lives. A significant friendship starts with a commitment to being friends and the promise to be there for each other through thick and thin. Without commitment, the relationship is ill-defined or non-existent. Without promise, the relationship has no future, and eventually withers.

To put it another way, every significant relationship must start with two questions: 1) "Do you accept me?" And 2) "Will you stick around?" These questions and their answers are not necessarily spoken aloud but on some level they are asked and answered. If I want to be your friend but you will not accept me then no friendship is formed. If you are willing to accept me but I never see you again then the relationship fades. A covenant friendship has both commitment in the form of unconditional acceptance and the promise to remain friends tomorrow. A covenant family is marked by unconditional love and the promise that you can count on that love even when you screw up.

2. THE NEED FOR COMMITMENT AND PROMISE

It shouldn't take long to figure out that our world is in desperate need of healthy, covenant relationships. Evidence of skewed relationships with one another is found everywhere. Self-proclaimed relationship "expert" Johnny Depp, said recently, "Marriage can be whatever you define it as. For example, I don't feel like I need a piece of paper that says I own her and she owns me. I think signing a piece of paper doesn't mean anything in the eyes of God or in the eyes of people. The thing is, if you are together and you love each other and are good to each other, make babies and all that, for all intents and purposes you are married." But marriage is meant to be a covenant. A covenant needs commitment or the relationship is ill-defined or non-existent. It needs promise or it cannot thrive.

The lack of commitment, though it can be seen in many different areas, is perhaps most glaringly seen in the breakup of many marriages. Though the divorce rate has declined slightly over the last few years, it is only because the number of couples living together, and then separating, has increased dramatically. Divorce rates do not include the 2/3 of people who live together and then eventually separate. Only about 1/3 of all people who live together before marriage actually end up getting married. Follow-up studies of these couples show that they suffer a 57% higher rate of divorce than those who have never lived together before marriage.

God's covenant with us is not contractual. He did not establish a covenant with his people based on the actions of his people. It was based on his love for humanity. It was not conditional. Our commitments are often different. They are contractual in nature: "As long as you do certain things or make me feel a certain way, I'll stay committed; if not,

forget it, I'm out of here."

Love always involves commitment. That commitment, whether we always agree with one another or not, involves decision. Love is a decision. Our society too often bases love on feelings alone. This leads many people into serious trouble. Feelings come and go. A decision to love does not come and go. It is unconditional.

I like the story told by the late, world-famous tenor Luciano Pavarotti:

"When I was a boy, my father, a baker, introduced me to the wonders of song. He urged me to work very hard to develop my voice. Arrigo Pola, a professional tenor in my hometown of Modena, Italy, took me as a pupil. I also enrolled in a teachers college. On graduating, I asked my father, 'Shall I be a teacher or a singer?' 'Luciano,' my father replied, 'if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair.' I chose one. It took seven years of study and frustration before I made my first professional appearance. It took another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. And now I think whether it's laying bricks, writing a book--whatever we choose--we should give ourselves to it. Commitment, that's the key. Choose one chair."

Commitment is not only necessary in marriage, but in parenting and strong friendships as well. We make commitments every day in our words to those with whom we are in relationship. We tell someone we will be there at a certain time; it is a commitment we make. We tell our parents we will be home at a certain time, and what we have done is given our word.

When these promises are not kept, something is lost, something dies. When people lie to you, it is a kind of death--the death of trust. When people make promises and do not keep them, trust is lost.

In his book *Pinocchio Nation*, author Devlin Donaldson suggests that our nation is fast becoming Pinocchio-like because of all the lies we tell. We wonder why our kids tell lies when we as parents lie all the time. We make promises we do not keep, and because they see this over and over, they live the same way.

Some fatherly advice came to Bob Hendricks years ago when his dad, Howard, told him, "Be so dependable that if you say you will be somewhere and don't show up, they send flowers." The Bible says, "If a man ... takes an oath to bind himself ... he shall not violate his word" (Num. 30:2). Jesus said, "Let your 'yes be yes,' and your 'no be no'" (Matt. 5:37). Solomon wrote, "It is better that you should not make a promise than that you

should make a promise and not keep it" (Eccl. 5:5). If it is true, as some suggest that the angels themselves record our promises, how disappointed they must be as time after time we forget them.

3. THE HOPE FOR COMMITMENT AND PROMISE

But here is the Good News! Hope comes to us through the Christ Child born in Bethlehem. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). "Through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). It is through the Christ that we have forgiveness for the many promises we have broken.

Some of you may, even after many years, be holding onto regrets over having broken a promise. And though you have repented many times, and even heard forgiveness pronounced ... there has always been this haunting feeling that you have not been forgiven. You may even fear that some of the unhappiness you are experiencing in life, or troubles that are looming on the horizon, are coming as a direct result of your disobedience--your inability to keep a promise. If so, let this season of Advent remind you anew: A Savior comes to forgive ... to forgive all your sins. The God who created you also covenanted a Savior to redeem you totally and completely.

He comes not only to forgive you, but also to empower you in your present covenant relationships. What does Scripture say? "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19). He comes to wrap his love around us and restore us, to help us love one another as he loves us. He comes with his very presence to bring us that which we do not have within ourselves--the power to forgive and love, the power of self-control, the power to keep our covenants. He comes to help us keep our promises.

Are there promises you are having difficulty keeping right now? If so, come to Christ and receive resurrection power ... covenant power! Come and allow the Holy Spirit to transform your unwilling spirit into a willing spirit who desires to do God's will.

Are there people who have not kept their promises to you and you are angry with them? If so, come to Christ and receive resurrection power ... covenant power to forgive! Come and allow the Holy Spirit to do within you what you cannot do for yourself ... to forgive and to let go.

CONCLUSION

Charles H. Spurgeon said, "I have thumbed my Bible many a year; I have never yet thumbed a broken promise." Healthy relationships are possible because God kept his promise and sent his Son into the world. His love is unconditional. His promises are true.