

“Storyline: Covenant”

Genesis 15 and Genesis 28

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First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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Well, Storyline is eighteen days old! And yesterday, as many of you know (and I understand there are many of you there for we have now sold or taken orders for 600 Daily Walk Bibles) ... anyway, yesterday we finished reading Genesis, the first part of the story.

So today we're going to start the second part of the story, the Book of Exodus. But before we do that and before we leave Genesis behind there's one more truth that I want to highlight for us. Before we talk about that truth though, let's do a little review.

Two weeks ago, in the first week of 2009, Storyline began. We read the opening chapters of Genesis and learned that we were created for ... what? That's right we were created for community because Genesis teaches us that it is only when we are in community, in right relationship with God, with each other and with everything else that creation is what God intended it to be.

When that right relationship exists at the end of Genesis chapter 1, God looks around at us and at the rest of the created universe and says it's "very good." And there are moments in each of our lives when we sense the same thing. We feel the same way God felt like everything is right in our world. And those are the great moments, aren't they?

But the reality is those moments in each of our lives are only moments. Oh, sometimes they last a little longer. Sometimes there are hours or even days. But there aren't months or year. Something always seems to happen to the feeling that everything's right doesn't it? Something always happens to separate us from the kind of goodness and community God created us to enjoy.

What separates us from God, from other people and from harmony with the world around us is a spiritual reality the Bible calls sin. Isaiah 59:2 says it clearly, "your sins have made a separation between you and your God..." And last week in Genesis 3 and Genesis 12 we saw how the separation happens.

It happens in a three-part pattern that keeps repeating itself across the pages of the Old Testament. It starts when we stop trusting God. It widens when we try to define what's "good" by ourselves. And when we take what we think is "good" and act on it, sin enters our lives and instead of living in community, we run away from it and try to hide our guilt.

So Genesis 1 teaches us that we were created for community. And Genesis 3 shows us that we were separated from community by a spiritual reality called sin. But this morning, there is a third truth Genesis wants to teach us. It's found in both our Scripture lessons this morning and like the first two truths it too can be summarized in a sentence. To make sense of the sentence though, we've got to define one crucial word and that word is covenant.

The word occurs quite a lot in the Bible, 285 times in the Old Testament alone, and the concept is even more common than the word. But while the word may be common to the language of the Bible, it's not to us. We don't use the word much anymore. So what does it really mean?

The dictionary defines the word covenant in two ways. It says first that a covenant is "a binding agreement" and second that it's "a promise." And both definitions are accurate from the Bible's perspective. The interesting part though is that in a Bible dictionary the order of the two elements is usually reversed; because in the Bible promise always comes first.

So in Genesis 15 our first lesson this morning the account of God's renewal of the covenant with Abram, the story starts out with a promise. Genesis 15:1 says, "Afterward, God spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, 'Don't be afraid Abram, for I will protect you and your reward will be great.'" It's actually not just one promise, is it? No, it's two; one gracious promise on top of another, "grace upon grace."

But there's more. For the first promise is really a repeated one. This is the second time God promises to protect Abram and it's preceded by a command, "Don't be afraid." Why? Because Abram has already failed to trust this promise once, hasn't he?

For as we saw last week in Genesis 12, precisely because he is afraid, Abram tells Sarai to say she's his sister. He does it to protect himself because he's stopped trusting God will protect him. But even then, "afterwards" Genesis 15 says, even after that, God's promise is repeated.

So the point is this. This is not a promise Abram deserves. This is a promise that comes to him after his mistrust had already broken the covenant God made with him. And there is no reason after that for God to renew His promise his protection to Abram except for one. The God of the Bible is a God who loves to take something broken and turn it into something beautiful.

In 1463, in Florence Italy, the town Council decided they needed a monument to enhance the status of their city. They commissioned a sculptor named Agostino di Duccio to carve a giant statue to stand in front of city hall. The Council made two stipulations in the commission. First, the statue should depict a biblical character and second, it should be carved in a style that reflected beauty and strength.

Agostino agreed to the terms. He went to a quarry near Carrara and marked off a 19-foot slab to be cut from white marble. When he marked the slab, however, he failed to mark that it should be cut more widely at its base. As a result as it was being removed, the block of marble fell and fractured, producing a deep crack that ran down the length of one of its sides.

The sculptor declared the stone useless and demanded the Council pay for another. But the council refused. So the gleaming block of marble lay on its side for the next 38 years, a source of embarrassment to everyone.

Then, in 1501, a young man approached the council. He was the son of a local official and he asked to be given permission to use the broken slab. The young man's name was Michelangelo Buonarroti. He was 26 years old. He promised the Council of Florence that if they would give him permission to use the broken slab he would turn it into a thing of beauty.

He received permission and went to work behind the cathedral. A year went by, then two. After three years the work was finally finished but it took 49 men five days more to bring it to rest in front of the city hall.

When it was unveiled however there were gasps, then cheers for the giant stone had been transformed from a flawed marble slab into a statue that amazed everyone who looked at it.

And within a year people were traveling from all across Europe to look at the 14-foot statue of David relaxing after the defeat of Goliath. It was more than the city fathers had ever envisioned or hoped for. But it began with a promise, a promise by Michelangelo to turn something broken into something beautiful.

That's the power of a promise. And that's why God renews his covenant promise to Abram in Genesis 15. For in Genesis 15 God takes the same man whose faith had been flawed with fear and mistrust in Egypt and continues to work with him, just like Michaelangelo continued to work with that flawed marble slab.

And when God renewed his promise, Abram's trust was restored. "Abram believed the Lord" Genesis says "and the Lord declared Him righteous because of his faith."

You see if sin and separation is caused by mistrust, the only way back is to restore the trust. But in order to restore trust, someone always has to take the first step. And according to the Bible that someone is always God. God is always reaching out to people in the Old Testament trying to draw them back into covenant with Him, so he can make something beautiful out of their brokenness.

It happens again to Abraham and Isaac. It happens to Jacob and Joseph. It happens to all of them and it becomes the third great truth Genesis is meant to teach us. God's covenant is His attempt to reclaim us despite our sins. Through the covenant God intends to overcome our mistrust by and renew our faith.

Created for community; separated by sin; claimed again in covenant love; in a nutshell those are the three truths that Genesis is trying to teach us. It's why the book was written. We need to know each of these three truths but most of all we need to know them together. Created for community; separated by sin, claimed again in covenant love which takes what was broken and turns it into something beautiful.

Thomas Edison understood the relationship between these three great truths or at least it appears as though he did for there is a famous story told about him that goes something like this. When Edison and his staff were developing the incandescent light bulb, it took them hundreds of hours to manufacture a single prototype.

One day, after finishing a light bulb, Edison handed it to a young errand boy. He asked him to take it upstairs to a testing room. As the boy turned and started up the stairs, he stumbled. The light bulb slipped from his hands and shattered on the steps.

Everything stopped. Edison walked over to the boy and instead of scolding him, he asked him what had happened. When the boy explained, Edison accepted his explanation. Then he turned to his staff and told them to start working on replacement.

When the new bulb was finished, a few days later, Edison walked over to the same boy. He handed him the bulb and he repeated the same words he had said to him before, "Would you please take this up to the testing room."

Can you imagine for a moment the thoughts that must have run through the boy's mind. He knew he didn't deserve this. But here he was, being trusted once more, being invited to believe that the great inventor still believed in Him.

And that's exactly what God wants you and I to know too. He understands that we've failed Him in the past. But His great desire is to restore us our relationship. So He reaches out and offers us a covenant.

I will make you a promise God says. I invite you to trust it. And if you accept my offer and put your faith in my promise, I will do more than Edison. I won't simply give you an opportunity to redeem yourself. I will do the work for you. I will send my Son to redeem you. Will you trust me to do that? Will you put your faith in my gracious promise and enter into a new covenant with me?

My friends, I want to ask you this morning. Have you trusted God yet? Have you put your faith in what He has done to redeem you? If you haven't, I hope you will because if you do I guarantee you, God will take your brokenness whatever it is and turn it into something beautiful.

Let's pray ...