

Sermon Archive 474

Sunday 3 March, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Exodus 20: 1-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Ok, if covenant is the making of a promise that you will keep whatever the response, then it's not like a contract. In a contract you'll describe the response that's required. I will give you my love, and in return your response will be A, B and C. All quite clear! In a covenant though, I guess you just hope that the response you get will have grown sort of naturally out of the love you've expressed - and will have your lover's finger prints all over it - like it's kind of spontaneous, in character with the character you love. Part of the delight of covenant is that it allows a free and creative response - not something you have to impose.

All right. That kind of makes sense.

Let's imagine then that we're a planet; and seeing a rainbow hung in our sky, we remember that God said "I will be your God, and never again will destroy you with a flood". How do we respond to that? What would a good covenant response be? God hasn't given us clear direction in what now we ought to do. Maybe, like we say, God's waiting to be delighted by what we come up with.

And let's imagine that we're an old couple called Abraham and Sarah, and God has said to us "I'll make a covenant with you, and promise you a future". How do we respond to *that*? Well, I guess we accept the invitation to journey with God. But on the journey, do we perhaps wonder whether what we bring to our journeying is what God had in mind? Like, does God want talking, and if so, what about? Does God want prayer, and if so how? Does God want thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil? Surely God must want more than to love mercy, do justice and humble walking. In the end, with Abraham and Sarah's covenant, the main formal response seems to be the circumcising of their boys and men . . . Who'd have seen *that* coming?

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I think we can imagine God wondering whether humanity might be uncertain in the non-specificity of covenant. We can imagine God maybe feeling like it would be kind just to nudge us in a helpful direction. In mercy, maybe God yearns to help us with a clue.

Certainly, some way into their exodus walk, the people receive a fairly detailed description of a form of life that's suitable for a covenant people.

- They will have only one God.
- They will not misuse the name of their God, or produce false gods.
- They will keep a Sabbath, so not work themselves to death each day.
- They will honour their parents.
- They will refrain from killing one another.
- They will be faithful in their closest relationships.
- They shall not steal or lie.
- They shall be content with what they have.

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It's kind of fashionable to resent being commanded to do certain things (DON'T YOU TELL ME WHAT TO DO). But maybe if you're floating around in the desert, wondering how even to begin expressing covenant gratitude (what does God want from us), then maybe a set of commandments like these are going to be a relief. Ah, at last this is something we can be confident will fit well into covenant response - to please God, or to belong to God's covenant by living a life where everyone is safe and well.

Well, it might fit well, but the covenant fragility here is easy to find: the special form of life is unattainable. Within a really short time the failure is so complete that Moses smashes the tablets on which the commandments are written. He does this, we assume, in burning anger (but maybe also slightly in hurt and frustration - had he seen beauty in the vision of a life of honour, caring, balance and contentment? How disappointing to see it immediately not work!)

So, in terms of covenant **development** as we move through Lent - it seems that the moment of **not knowing** what God wants, having been swallowed by **seeing** what God wants, now is eaten by inability to do it. Covenant and commandment . . . Like we have asked over the last two Sundays, can this covenant last?

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Many years later, we find a teacher from Galilee who believes it **can** last, and **has**. And it's interesting to watch what he does with the commandments that no one can keep. He has this habit of saying "you have heard it said that A, B and C; but I say to you X, Y and Z. Generally he amplifies the requirements. He makes them even more impossible, but always in a way that reveals the love or wisdom within them. He reveals the heart in them, the real issues within what we fail to do. You know, you're not technically cheating on your spouse, so that's OK; but when you look with desire upon someone other than

your spouse, what's going on there? What's **really** going on, other than a technical non-breach? And how is your spouse to feel? And have you been honourable? Are you nurturing covenant?

As Jesus handles the commandments, he's digging deeper than technical failure. He's calling us to understand our hearts. Is that his way of nurturing a good covenant response? See, what **is** covenant? How is it different from contract? Does God prescribe how we say thank you? Or does God call us to some response that has grown organically within us, through our engagement with what we know of our God, and our deeper, most honest selves? Commandment, within covenant, revealing our deeper, most honest selves . . .

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Perhaps Jesus' most profound observation about religious law though (thou shalt do this, shalt not do that) is that the spirit of the law is fulfilled when we love God and our neighbours. Questioned by an enquirer, "*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*" he said to him, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*" *This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*" [Matthew 22: 36-40]

All the law hangs on our rising to the challenge of loving God and neighbour (and also maybe even self - love of self in the right way). Love.

From confusion about what God wants, to knowledge of what God commands, to despair about our incapacity to provide it, to a new questioning of how, even when letter of the law fails, God's desire for us anyway is fulfilled. If God enables people to love, then the covenant is finding nurture. And nurtured within it, we are more inclined to answer the question "can it survive?" with a gentle but convicted "yes it can".

And that, in a way, is the end of the sermon. Maybe just a few words, though, about two pictures that came to my mind when thinking about covenant people and commandments.

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The first picture was American Gothic, painted in 1930 by Grant Wood, an artist from Iowa, USA. In the background there's a house, but it looks like a church. These people come from a God-fearing house. They're dressed for hard work, done in the plainest spirit and style. There's a strength there - but not a lot of smiling. The man's pitchfork is not a friendly implement. A few

years after it was painted, when it was printed in the Cedar Rapids Gazette in Iowa (where the painting was set), there was a huge public outcry. Iowans were furious at their depiction as "pinched, grim-faced, puritanical Bible-thumpers" [quote / unquote]. I wonder why it was that my mind went to this painting when looking for images about covenant and commandment. Maybe it's something to do with what I said earlier about human reluctance to be commanded - a kind of resentment we feel must go with being told what to do.

I came also, however, to Geoffrey Todd's painting "Drought Breaker", where Jesus has unlocked the joy of the other figure in the scene. Two people locked in a posture of joy. Is this maybe what "loving God and neighbour" looks like? If so, wouldn't this be a better image for us to hold as we think of the covenant God's vision for human life? What does God want? A pitchfork and stoic expression - or joy between people?

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And let's imagine that we're an old couple called Abraham and Sarah, and God has said to us "I'll make a covenant with you, and promise you a future". How do you respond to *that*? Does God want thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil? Surely God must want more than to love mercy, do justice and humble walking . . .

Love. Joy. Peace between people. What a vision! So, thank you, our covenant God.



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