

# March 16, 2014 Lent 1

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*The reading this morning from Genesis contains one of the most important themes that we find in the Old Testament. The theme is the three-fold promise of land, descendants and blessing, which is first announced in this reading as a command from Yahweh. These promises are repeated throughout the story of Abram and subsequently as we come to know him Abraham. The promise is of utmost importance as Abraham and his direct descendants end up owning very little of the land themselves.*

## **Genesis 12: 1-4a**

<sup>1</sup>GOD told Abram: “Leave your country, your family, and your father’s home for a land that I will show you.

<sup>2</sup>I’ll make you a great nation and bless you.

I’ll make you famous; you’ll be a blessing.

<sup>3</sup>I’ll bless those who bless you; those who curse you I’ll curse.

All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you.”

<sup>4</sup>So Abram left just as GOD said, and Lot left with him.

*In chapter 4, of Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul uses the Old Testament example of Abraham to illustrate justification by grace through faith. In the passage before us Paul argues that Abraham stood approved before God, righteous before God, on the basis of God’s faithfulness, appropriated through faith, without any reference whatsoever to his obedience before God. In fact, God reckoned Abraham righteous, making him the spiritual father of all children of faith.*

## **Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17**

<sup>1</sup>So how do we fit what we know of Abraham, our first father in the faith, into this new way of looking at things? <sup>2</sup>If Abraham, by what he did for God, got God to approve him, he could certainly have taken credit for it. But the story we’re given is a God-story, not an Abraham-story. <sup>3</sup>What we read in Scripture is, “Abraham entered into what God was doing for him, and that was the turning point. He trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own.”

<sup>4</sup>If you’re a hard worker and do a good job, you deserve your pay; we don’t call your wages a gift. <sup>5</sup>But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it’s something only God can do, and you trust him to do it—you could never do it for yourself no matter how hard and long you worked—well, that trusting-him-to-do-it is what gets you set right with God, by God. Sheer gift.

<sup>13</sup>That famous promise God gave Abraham—that he and his children would possess the earth—was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God’s decision to put everything together for him, which Abraham then entered when he believed. <sup>14</sup>If those who get what God gives them only get it by doing everything they are told to do and filling out

all the right forms properly signed, that eliminates personal trust completely and turns the promise into an ironclad contract! That's not a holy promise; that's a business deal. <sup>15</sup>A contract drawn up by a hard-nosed lawyer and with plenty of fine print only makes sure that you will never be able to collect. But if there is no contract in the first place, simply a promise—and God's promise at that—you can't break it.

<sup>16</sup>This is why the fulfillment of God's promise depends entirely on trusting God and his way, and then simply embracing him and what he does. God's promise arrives as pure gift. That's the only way everyone can be sure to get in on it, those who keep the religious traditions and those who have never heard of them. For Abraham is father of us all. He is not our racial father—that's reading the story backwards. He is our faith father.

<sup>17</sup>We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody. Isn't that what we've always read in Scripture, God saying to Abraham, "I set you up as father of many peoples"? Abraham was first named "father" and then became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

**THANKS BE TO GOD!**

## SERMON – LEGALISM VERSUS PROMISE

I remember as a child having to go to confession and I never understood what this meant. As a child I only saw this as a rule I had to follow. I think that I will start today with a little story that I read this past week.

Little Johnny had to go to confession. So he goes into the confessional and begins, "Father forgive me for I have sinned."

The priest responds with, "Johnny is that you?"

Johnny answers, "Yes Father."

The priest asks Johnny about his sins.

Johnny confesses, "Father I kissed a girl behind the school."

The priest with great concern asks, "Oh Johnny who was this girl that you kissed?"

Johnny responds, "I am sorry Father, but I don't feel good about naming her."

The priest states, "To truly receive absolution, you must confess all of your sin."

Johnny again responds with, "I am sorry Father but it does not feel right to name her."

The priest asks, "Was it Mary?"

To which Johnny replies, "No, Father."

"Was it Jane?"

Johnny again replies, "No, Father."

"Was it Nancy?"

Once more Johnny replies, "No, Father."

The priest finally frustrated say, "Okay Johnny if you are not going to tell me I am sorry but as penance I am going to have to not let you be an altar boy for the next four months and you have to say 5 Hail Mary's and 4 Our Fathers.

Johnny leaves the confessional and goes to the back pew and sits beside his best friend Billy.

Billy asks, "So, how did it go."

Johnny responds, "Great, I got four months holidays and the names of 3 good prospects."

As a young person I was forced to go to confession, because that was one of the rules that as a good Catholic boy I was told needed to be followed. Especially at this time of the year, as to truly experience Easter I was told that I need to attend confession. I never understood this but it was one of the rules we had to follow.

I have another story of people I know who lived their lives following the "law." So, my children's great grandparents were of Dutch descent. Actually they only immigrated to Canada at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War from the Netherlands to northwestern Ontario.

They were very sweet people, but they were also very strict, religiously. They were members of a Dutch Reformed religion and this sense of religion influenced their whole lives. They never in their lives owned a television, because it was forbidden. They were only allowed to listen to some news on the radio; they could not listen to music. They had an organ in their home, on which they played hymns only. Their great grandmother never cut her hair, it was also forbidden and she only ever wore dresses and skirts, she never wore pants throughout her entire life. These regulations were all a part of the laws that were prescribed by their faith and they followed them, forgive the pun, religiously. If I think about it in all the years I knew them, as I said they were sweet people, but they never really seemed happy. They seemed to be sad and their lives were all about making money, which they rarely spent, but they also lived their lives in fear of their God, who was a God of rules, regulations, vengeance and fear.

Last week we began to explore Derek Flood's book Healing the Gospel and during her reflection Sharon began to talk about penal substitution; the idea that Jesus was punished because of and instead of us. This has influenced our theology of the cross, or how we view the cross, and the crucifixion and Jesus for a long time.

As we journey towards Easter, we are challenging ourselves to look at all of this in a new way. This idea is based in the law, as Derek Flood states, "Penal substitution classically see a conflict between God's desire for mercy (which in this legal framework refers to God's desire to be lenient and not punish), and the demand for justice (which it sees as focused on punishment). In this view, love is viewed as sentimental and weak, and opposed to justice."

Much of what we currently understand about penal substitution is based in biblical legalism. The idea that what is important in the bible are the laws and that we must follow the law to the letter. There is no interpretation, there only the law. Legalism as a theology is an over emphasis on discipline, conduct or legal ideas, the law, which can then usually neglect any idea around God's mercy or God's grace. This emphasizes the letter of the law over the spirit of the law. This then holds the view that obedience to the law, not belief in God's grace, is the preeminent path

to redemption. Salvation is only attainable by holding fast to the laws and obedience to the law. Legalism, for many is based in the Old Testament;

“If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in [God's] ways, and observing [God's] commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.”- Deuteronomy 30:16

If we look at this passage from Deuteronomy it lays out the basic understanding that we use in regards to the law. We are to follow the law and we will be rewarded. In today's world we are told that if we follow the law we will be successful and our lives will be good. It is also then implied that if we don't follow the law then we will face the consequences of our actions, we will be punished. This is the basis for our justice system and in many ways the basis of penal substitution, in that we are sinful and therefore a price, a punishment, needed to be extracted.

Paul/Saul is believed by many to be the poster child for legalism in the New Testament, when we look at his life as Saul before his conversion.

If we remember the story of Paul, we will remember that he began his life as Saul. Saul was very aware of the laws, as a Pharisee, he had to know the laws, but that was all he knew. There is a story in the book of Acts that describes the stoning of Stephen in chapter 7:58 states that those who were witness to this laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Saul lived a life based in penal substitution, you broke the laws, you paid the price and many paid the ultimate price because of Saul's and the rest of the Pharisee's interpretation of the laws. What they believed the laws meant.

David Deane a professor of systematic theology at the Atlantic school of Theology in Halifax experienced this tension between legalism and an alternative this past September. Dr. Deane was invited to present a paper to a college of Roman Catholic medical doctors in Rome, Italy. His paper was around some of the issues that surrounded the stance of the Roman Catholic Church around abortion. Now Dr. Deane was not disputing the Church's stand on abortion, but he was also asking those present to consider something other than just the law of the church. He was asking those present to approach each case through the lens of relationship; relationship with the individual and relationship with God.

In a conversation that I had with Dr. Deane after he had returned from his trip, he lamented the fact that those present seemed to be so entrenched in, what he saw as, legalism that they could not imagine a new way.

Last week Sharon talked about the conversion of Saul, and how he became Paul. Flood says the following about Paul's conversion, “ His conversion was a conversion away from the religiously justified violence he had formally embraced.....it was a recognition that his former embrace of violence in God's name was not in fact an act of faithfulness, but a grave sin.” And then, “Paul has converted away from the way of retribution, and Romans is his treatise explaining why the way of restorative justice is a better way.”

We are going to be challenged this Lent to imagine a new way; a way that might allow us to see the entire journey to Easter in a new way.

In our reading this morning from Genesis we hear of the promise that God gave to Abraham. The promise of a new land and many descendants the promise of a great future and Abraham trusted and followed what God has asked of him.

What is interesting is that this promise, this covenant that God made with Abraham is one sided, there are no requirements of Abraham, there are no curses on Abraham, and there is no punishment. There is nothing but the promise from God.

This is echoed in our reading from Romans this morning where Paul talks about Abraham entering into what God was doing and not working at it in his own way. We are called to see the life that God calls us to as a life fulfilling a promise, a promise from God. As Paul says this is not a contract, with legal fine print, this is a promise made from God and being a promise, we are called to trust. This idea of promise is at odds with those legal contracts with all that fine print that basically never allows us to collect.

This Lent we are working our way from an understanding of the cross as a legal punishment for a crime that Jesus did not commit. To an understanding of the cross as something different.

To get there we are challenged to begin to look at life, not through the lens of legalism, a lens of retribution and punishment. But rather we are challenged to look at life through the lens of restoration and promise, through the lens of love, knowing that love is never weak or opposed to justice, it is rather another way of looking at and living our lives in God. God made a promise to Abraham, a promise that he needed to trust in and we are called to live into that same promise of love. We are challenged to view the world through the love of God and a cross that is based on penal substitution and punishment does not fit in with a God of love.

This is an ongoing journey for us this Lent as we come to terms with a cross based in love not a cross based in retribution and punishment. We will walk this journey together and it is hoped that we can come out of this Lent with even a little tiny bit of the understanding of God's love shown in the cross.

Richard Hays is a New Testament scholar, who is currently the Dean of New Testament at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina and I would like to leave you with a quote of his to think about. Hays said, "God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. If that shocking event is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down....all values are transformed.....God refuses to play games of power and prestige on human terms." **AMEN**