

MARCH 14, 2021

COVENANT

LENT IV
UNBREAKABLE

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EPHESIANS 2:1-10

Our worship series this Lenten season has been about covenants: promises that bind God and God's people – God and us – together. This covenant relationship serves as the foundation of the trust between God and us, and God uses the terms of these covenants to unpack his vision for us: of creation and our relationship with it; of shared provision and blessing; of human communities and societies, shaped by who God is and what God values.

But in tension with the beauty and life-giving potential of God's vision and God's faithful commitment to these covenants is our inability to keep promises and live up to our side of things. We cannot keep God's covenant; we break our promises, again and again.

The first few verses of our reading from Ephesians paint a grim picture of our reality of broken covenants and failed promises. It's a short and pointed description of the human condition of sinfulness.

Moral failure, as we follow the world's ways, aligning ourselves with what's broken and sinful and damaging in this world, and choosing to walk that path, instead of God's. A breaking of trust, as we transgress all God's rules, all God's hopeful law-giving and promise-making for what our lives and our life together, with each other and with him, should be like. And we succumb to self-indulgence, satisfying the worst of our desires and impulses, letting our crooked, broken behaviour and its consequences seep into and warp every part of our lives and the world.

Sin is more than breaking God's rules. Here in Ephesians, the driver behind that sin and its corrosive effect on life is referred to as the ruler of the spiritual powers in space, the spirit controlling those who won't follow God. However we refer to evil and understand its action, we observe the terrible consequences of sin at work: things are no longer as God made them to be. And we bear witness. In a world of plenty, some have more than they need while others starve; in a world of medical advancements and technology, some are able to buy better care for themselves while others suffer and die from preventable and curable illness. And we know, because God has taught us, that those things are deeply wrong. We experience the consequences of sin at work in the world and in society, and at work in the hearts and minds of people we know.

We are sinned against; but we also sin.

However brilliant and sensible and logical God's rules are, humanity can't manage to follow them. However much God's people want God's vision for us and creation to become our reality, however much we long for suffering and sin and injustice to end, even we can't keep our covenant promises with God. The only steadfastly faithful party in all of this is God; only God can keep God's covenant. And so, God does something so generous, so full of love, that we still struggle to fully understand it: in Christ, God became enough like us to make this covenant between himself and his very human people unbreakable.

By grace, we have been saved through faith, and it's entirely Christ's doing.

God's desire to see us forgiven and made right with him is so great, his mercy and love so abundant, that even when we are as far from him as we can be, as spiritually dead as we may be, God brings us to life with Christ. It's got nothing at all to do with our worthiness or how loveable we are, and everything to do with how incredibly loving God is. It's by God's grace, by God's loving action, that we're made alive with Christ. We're kind of just tag-along, according to this bit of Scripture; everything good and amazing that happens to us, happens with Christ.

God brought us to life, with Christ. We are in union, with Christ, raised up with Christ, ruling with Christ in God's heavenly presence. In all things, we are "with Christ."

That's an awful lot of "with-ing." It reminds me of another "with," too, one we hear at Christmas: Emmanuel, God with us. And that is exactly what God has done. In Christ, with Christ, God is with us and we are made right: all God's promises are kept with us, with Christ.

Back when I was learning to teach university students, we talked a lot about threshold concepts. A threshold concept is something you learn that opens up a whole new world of new ideas and possibilities beyond it, like walking through a doorway. Once you grasp a threshold concept, you can't really unlearn it or un-experience it, because it changes you and the way you think and understand the world around you.

Recognising God's grace is kind of like that. Or at least, grace brings us to the threshold, brings us out of that awful, sin-corrupted reality of brokenness and failed promises, and positions us at the threshold of a new future with Christ.

By grace, we are forgiven of our broken, sinful behaviour, of our failures to act or speak against the sinful forces at play in our world, and the consequences from God of that sin. By grace, we are made right with God and each other; we have been saved.

As we stand at that threshold, our salvation is past tense; it's done and somebody else – Jesus – did it for us. Salvation, God's extraordinary gesture of grace and love, can be our new reality. Grace and the salvation it offers us brings us to the threshold of a whole new way of living with Christ.

But then what? After we're saved, what's next?

Imagine us all, standing on the threshold, the doorstep. Do we stand there for a while, and then turn back, rejecting this incredible grace? Do we set up camp on the doorstep and just bask in God's grace, and stay still? Or do we go forward, into that new future, with Christ?

God's grace is so powerful that it can transform the very worst person into a committed, active believer; God's grace is so powerful it can forgive and make right all sin – our own sinful actions and thoughts and words, and the systemic sin at work in the world. Grace is powerful, and amazing. But even then, after all that, grace isn't quite finished.

And that's because grace doesn't just restore and erase the past: it opens up a new future, rich with possibility, for us, too.

Grace and faith are gifts, freely given by God through Jesus. Grace, and all the good things that we experience because of it, grace is a gift that is in no way the result of our activity, our works or good deeds. Even the faith that allows us to welcome God's grace, even faith doesn't grow in us under our own steam. Faith is a part of grace, the part that empowers our faith response.

Grace and faith are gifts...but it matters to God how we live after we receive his grace. We can't stand on the threshold, on the doorstep forever.

Grace changes what is sinful into something holy, setting us apart for God. Grace works within us, and it begins to produce new, holy ways of thinking and acting, like graciousness, kindness, joy, and love. We become more and more like Jesus; not perfectly, and not instantly. Living holy is a journey we make – with Christ – as we struggle with sin, and succeed in love, held within the abiding presence of God's grace.

There is another “with” for us, with Christ.

At the very end of our reading from Ephesians today, we find a paradox, and the way forward. It’s completely clear to us that our salvation is not our own work. We can read it, baldly stated, here in Ephesians. But we know it, too; we’ve just spent three Sundays talking about the inability of God’s people, our inability, to keep covenant with God, to live a holy life and in just, life-giving communities of believers on our own. We know full well that we’ve got nothing to boast about. So grace is not ours because we are good and moral, and salvation is not earned through our deeds.

And yet – and here’s the paradox – we are made by God and we are made for a life of good deeds, good deeds that are pre-approved and prepared for us to do, with Christ. Because of God’s grace, outpoured in us, because we are with Christ in so many good and amazing and life-giving ways, we are expected to participate with Christ in the good work Christ does.

Our Scripture reading has exposed to our gaze a key moment in our spiritual journeys, and I believe that whoever we are, wherever we are on our journeys, we can find our spot, our location, in this passage: walking in the wasteland of sin and suffering and pain; poised –perhaps stuck – on the threshold, encompassed by grace, but not quite able to move forward; or walking with Christ, working with Christ, accomplishing those good deeds for which we were created.

These are steps on the journey we all must take. But we don’t take them alone – we take them with Jesus.

For it is by God's grace that we have been saved through faith. That faith – and the covenant promises it upholds – that faith is unbreakable. Unbreakable, because it begins and ends, it’s initiated and it is finished by the perfect love of God, revealed to us by Christ, and made ours with Christ, on the Cross.

Thanks be to God! Amen.