

Sermon Text for February 5, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 17:1-10, Romans 3:1-10

“God’s People”

We had a wonderful celebration of John’s resurrection yesterday. I have never heard this church sing the way that it sang to celebrate his presence with the Lord. It is one of those events where you leave understanding why we do what we do here at First Presbyterian. Last week we talked about the covenant that God has made with us. Little did I know that the women’s Tuesday Bible study was also studying about covenants. Today we see something very similar. The story of the covenant continues and we find the one thing that God required of Abram in order for that covenant to be fulfilled by God, and that was circumcision. Remember last week, we talked about that. What has taken the place of circumcision, the sign of the covenant for the Jewish people, what has taken its place here in our Christian understanding of the covenant that we have with God. What two things do we do in order to mark and seal the relationship with God?

Last week at the end of the service we were able to gather together to look at the year gone by and examine our yearly report. If you want to know what happens in this church, look through this report. It is what we do as God’s people. God’s people, that is a term that we use often. Before communion today I will say, these are the gifts of God, for the people of God. I’m talking to us, we are the people of God. We use the terminology of saying that we are family with the thought that God is our Father. We have been able to see as a community the difference that Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross has made for us and been able to see the results. We have shared a lot of faith and life experiences. Today we ask the question what benefit do we have as the people of God as together we take part in the covenant that God has made with us.

READ SCRIPTURE

The story of Abraham is always a classic one especially as we continue to talk about the covenant that God makes with God’s people. If we want to talk about God’s people we have to talk about it in terms of the covenant that God made with us. Through Abraham God makes certain promises that we read earlier. God creates a new people, the people of God. As a sign of that covenant, a visible sign of God’s invisible grace God

gave circumcision to mark the fact that God will be faithful, God will be by our side and we shall be God's people.

But, and this is part of the covenant that at times we miss. The covenant is always between two parties. God doesn't make it with himself, but rather with Abraham and his descendants. God will remain faithful and Abraham and his descendants, their part is to follow God's commandments. What makes the Jews the people of God, what benefit do they enjoy? God claims them as God's own, and they will follow God's commands. This is explained both in our Genesis and in our Romans Scripture.

As Christians we also enjoy the special privilege and responsibility of being God's chosen people. In baptism and communion we have before us the sign of the covenant that God has made with us as people of faith. These signs seen in the water and the bread and juice are signs of God's promise that he will remain faithful to us. But like circumcision, the sign is only as good as the person living out their life under these signs.

Baptism doesn't put a special, magical cloud of protection and ensure that our children will grow up in faith. No, that is why the parents and the congregation make promises that they will seek God's direction and guidance and acknowledge that God has done his part in the covenant agreement and now it is our time to do our part.

Likewise, today, in communion if we take it, it doesn't automatically seal us for paradise or make us a better person than our neighbor or than the one who stayed home in order to get ready for the big game tonight. No, this sign of the covenant gives us an advantage only as far as we live in the promises of that covenant that are made with God and us. Just like we saw last week, the cross of Christ is only so helpful as long as we choose to carry that cross and live out our calling in that cross. The covenant is only as good as gift given to us which we choose to open. If we choose not to open it, it is still there, it just goes unused and all of its benefits are not realized.

God has done God's part. God has fulfilled the covenant. God has chosen us, God wants to be in relationship with us and these sacraments represent for us the fact that we are the people of God and that God has chosen us to be God's people. So what value then was it for the Jews in Abraham's and then later even Paul's day to be a Jew, to be God's chosen one, and likewise, what value is it for us? Paul says that value is that God chooses to be in relationships, to communicate, to give God's words to us as the people of God. The covenant made between the two parties was made with none other except those who would call themselves followers of Jesus Christ.

But there is a problem. We have said that a covenant is made between two parties. In this case God and the people of God. In the Old Testament or covenant it was between God and the descendants of Abraham with circumcision marking those who are part of that covenant. In the new covenant it is between God and the world and a sign of the people of God are those who have been baptized and who take part in the Lord's supper. God has been faithful, but we have not. Since one side of the treaty, since one side of the covenant has broken down, God has every right to say, you didn't hold your end of the bargain, I'm out.

Does our unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God? Absolutely not! Paul says: God is true and will never renege on the covenant that he has made with us. I know what some of you are thinking, our children look at it the same way. You mean, I can do whatever I want and God will still be faithful? Or even worse, why don't I really do bad things because God's grace and goodness will be even more evident in contrast to my actions. Let us really sin boldly so that we can see God's grace abound.

There are times when our kids will do things on purpose that they know they are not supposed to do just to get a response from us. The rebellious child is really calling out love me, pay attention to me, make up for my faults by coming close to me and saying that in spite of all this I still love you.

God does not depend upon us to remain faithful. God was faithful to Abraham, to David, to the Israelites and the prophets, and finally, to us. How has God proven that we are his people? In Jesus Christ, what we celebrate here on Sunday is that God loves his people so much that he sent his Son to die for us. God has chosen us as God's people in Jesus Christ. Amen.