

The King Whom God Promises

Genesis 17:1-8 (Advent)

As much as we're told to be of good cheer during the holiday season, Christmas can for many of us be a mixed bag emotionally. Some of us look forward to gathering with friends and family, and some of us dread the thought of it, or of spending yet another holiday working, or all alone. For some of us it's the excitement of our first holiday as a new couple, or with a new child; for others it's the sorrow of the first holiday without mom or dad, or a son or daughter. Many of us bounce back and forth between the joy of giving, and the pain of paying for it. For us, we're looking forward to seeing family for a few days in Nebraska, but before we even get there it's tempered by the knowledge that we'll have to say goodbye so quickly after arriving.

For as much joy and anticipation as fills the season, there is underneath it a reminder that not all is as it should be. In fact, the reason it is a season of *anticipation* is because we're looking for something to change, something new to happen, something painful to go away, something to come that will hopefully fill us with the happiness or significance we're looking for that feels so absent in our lives most of the time.

We sing at Christmas of joy and peace in God's plan. But despite the stories we tell and the songs we sing, there's a significant temptation to doubt the goodness of God's plan, or his ability to pull it off. We doubt his goodness because of how much bad stuff still happens in the world; we doubt his ability because despite his promises, nothing seems to change.

Yet Christmas is the hope of a world made right again. More specifically, Christmas is God's answer to that hope. The eternal Son of God took on human flesh, stepping into his own creation, in order to rescue a people for himself and establish his reign, his kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. He has come to take all that is wrong, all that is broken, all that is rebellious and opposed to his kingdom—every reminder that this world is not as it should be—and to bring it all back under his rightful rule, to make all things right again.

The book we've been studying together—the Gospel of Matthew—has been making this point over and over. But for this Advent season, we're taking our lead from a parable we looked at last week in Matthew 13, and looking at some of the *Old Testament* promises about God's coming King through the *New Testament* lens of Jesus.

Matthew 13:52 says, "Therefore every [scribe or] teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." As we talked about last week, the scribes of the Pharisees (some of the religious leaders in Jesus' day) were able bring out of the treasury only what was *old*—the promises of the Law and Prophets. Jesus wants his followers to bring out what is new *and* old—

the *Old* Testament promises as they are fulfilled in the *new* work that Jesus is doing. So that's our goal for the next few weeks—to see how the promises of God's coming king in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the new work of Jesus Christ.

This morning we're going all the way back to the beginning, to Genesis, where we find the first explicit promise of a king rising up among God's people: Genesis 17:1-8. And while we don't learn much about that king in these verses—who he is, what he will be like, when he will come—we learn quite a bit about *why* God will someday raise up a king—and it has everything to do with the longing in our hearts for a world made right. What we see in Genesis 17 is that despite the brokenness and rebellion that fills this world, God intends to reclaim his royal vision for creation. And he will do so by fulfilling his covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants.

The Story of Abraham

Genesis 17 is part of the larger story of a man named Abraham. A man whom God called to leave his country, his people and his father's household and go to the land God would show him, because he wanted to make Abraham into a great nation and to bless him. He promised to make his name great, and through him to bless all peoples on earth (Gen. 12:1-3).

We read Abraham's story in Genesis 12-25, and it's a story filled with a lot of ups and downs as Abraham follows God and waits for him to fulfill his promises. Because there are two big problems in story: the land God promised to give him is presently occupied by someone else, and Abraham's wife, Sarah, is barren—she can't have children. And even if she could, she's past her child-bearing years. Which makes it pretty difficult to become a great nation, with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, or the sand on the seashore (15:5; 22:17).

Abraham often finds himself tempted to doubt the goodness of God's plan or his ability to pull it off. In chapter 15, he worries that a member of his household will receive his inheritance, since despite God's promise he still has no child. In chapter 16, he takes matters into his own hands and tries to answer God's promise for him. He takes Sarah's advice and has a son with her servant, Hagar. It doesn't work—the son of promise will come through Sarah, not her servant.

For all the differences in culture, and for all the years that separate us from Abraham and his world, it's interesting to see how common is the temptation to doubt the goodness of God's plan or his ability to pull it off. And yet God wants us to know that he will be faithful to his promise, and to trust him to work out his plan in his own time and way. He wants Abraham to know his faithfulness and to trust him in this story. And so to bolster that trust, God makes a *covenant* with Abraham—a sacred agreement between them. He does this first in ch. 15, and again in ch. 17.

God's Covenant with Abraham

It's the second of these that we have in our passage this morning, Genesis 17. Look with me at vv. 1-2: “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm [or rather, *make*] my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase [or *multiply*] your numbers.’”

Notice how this chapter begins by reminding us of Abraham's problem: “when Abraham was 99 years old.” The chapter before this was the story of Abraham's failed attempt to make good on

God's promise for him, through Hagar and Ishmael. When that chapter ended he was 86 (16:16). Now he's 99, and still no son. It's not looking good. This is pretty impossible. But notice next how God introduces himself in this passage, just when we're tempted to despair: "he said to him, 'I am God Almighty.'" *El Shaddai*. He is the God who is powerful enough to do the impossible.

Then God says to Abraham, "walk before me and be blameless." The covenant God is making here is somewhat different than the one God made with Abraham in ch. 15. In that chapter, God made a one-sided covenant: he promised to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan, and asked of Abraham nothing in return. Here in ch. 17, this covenant includes not only promises from God, but stipulations for Abraham. He is called to walk in obedience and integrity of relationship with God. And if we keep reading in vv. 9-14, he and his family are to bear the sign of the covenant, circumcision, lest they be cut off from the covenant promises.

But what is this whole business about? We see two key ideas emphasized in these verses: God's desire to make a covenant with Abraham, and God's plan to multiply Abraham greatly, making him a father of many nations. We see this in v. 2, where God tells us his goal in calling Abraham to walk in obedience: "that [1] I may make my covenant between me and you, and [2] may multiply you greatly" (v. 2, ESV). We see it again as he introduces the covenant in v. 4: "As for me, [1] this is my covenant with you: [2] You will be the father of many nations." And then each of these two elements are expanded on. Verses 5-6 expand on his plan to multiply Abraham greatly: "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of *many nations*. I will make you *very fruitful*; I will make *nations* of you, and kings will come from you" (17:5-6). And vv. 7-8 expand on his plan to make a covenant with him: "I will establish my *covenant* as an everlasting *covenant* between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, *to be your God and the God of your descendants after you*. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and *I will be their God*" (17:7-8).

God enters into a sacred agreement with Abraham, pledging to be his God, and assuring him of his intention to fulfill his promises and bless him, giving him countless descendants, and more than that—making him a father of a multitude of nations, not just biologically, but spiritually (cf. Gal. 3:29). Even nations that do not come from his genealogical line will be blessed through their association with Abraham. And so his original name, Abram (which means something like "exalted father") will no longer suit; he is now *Abraham*, which sounds like the Hebrew for "father of a multitude." All this God will do, if Abraham will walk in obedience to God and his covenant—something we see him do by God's grace as the story unfolds (e.g. Gen. 22:1-18; 26:5).

God's Plan for Creation

God's covenant with Abraham is one of the pillars of the whole history of Israel, and the whole Bible story. But what's at stake in this covenant is not only God's promise to bless Abraham, but his plan for the entire creation. We see that in the language of the covenant itself. Look again at ch. 17, and notice the language God uses when he explains his plan to Abraham. Verse 1 again: "walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may *multiply* you greatly." And v. 6: "I will make you exceedingly *fruitful*, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you." The language of "fruitful" and "multiply"—where have we heard that before? Back in Genesis 1:28, and God's vision for humanity in creation: "And

God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (1:28, ESV).

What’s at stake in the promise to Abraham is nothing less than the restoration of God’s original plan for creation, the reassertion of God’s rightful rule over all the earth. The world made right again.

When God is introduced to us in the opening pages of Scripture, Genesis 1, he’s introduced to us not just as Creator but as King. We don’t see the word, but the idea is all over the place. Because he’s the one who makes everything, he’s the one who *owns* it. And since he owns it, he has the unique right to *rule* it. He’s the one who has the *power* to accomplish his plan. He’s the one who has *authority* to decide what is right and what is wrong (he “sees” what is “good”), and to hold to account any who refuse to submit to that plan—he is both Creator and King.

And central to God’s royal plan is his vision for humanity. Unlike every other creature under heaven, each made “according to their kind” (e.g. Gen. 1:21, 24, 25), God makes humans “in his image, after his likeness” (Gen. 1:26-27). Now there’s a lot of discussion on what it means to be made in God’s image, but I think we can summarize it in three words: *relationship*, *reflection*, and *representation*.

In Genesis 5, we read, “. . . When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’ [Sounds a lot like Genesis 1]. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son *in his own likeness, in his own image*; and he named him Seth” (Gen. 5:1-3). Here we see that to be “in someone’s image” is first and foremost about *relationship*—specifically, a parent-child relationship. We were made to be God’s children, his sons and daughters. And as his children, we’re meant to look like him. It’s also about *reflection*. I’m told quite often my children look a lot like me—they reflect my image. In the same way we are to look like God, not physically, but in terms of our character and how we live our lives. And as children of the King who reflect his character, we are also given the job of *representing* him—we are his royal representatives, called in Genesis 1:28 to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over it on behalf of our King (cf. Ps. 8).

This was God’s original vision for humanity. All of creation under his rule, enjoying his blessing, to the praise of his glory. It’s what’s missing in so much of life today. And the reason is not because God’s plan is not good, or he lacks the ability to pull it off. The reason is that we have rebelled against his rule.

This is what happened in Genesis ch. 3, what we often refer to as “the fall.” That’s when Adam and Eve (and all humanity in them) rejected God as king and sought to rule the world for themselves. In fact, if you want a definition for sin, it’s this: rebellion against God as king. It’s saying to him, ‘I don’t need you, and I’m not going to obey you. I can and I will do this on my own—my way. To the extent that your way lines up with my way, that’s fine; but if not, then I rule. I’m going to be king.’ This is sin, and it makes a mess. It makes a mess of our lives and relationships—both the sin we commit and the sin that’s committed against us. It makes a mess of the world around us. Worst of all, it makes a mess of our relationship with God. It separates us from him, bringing us under his just judgment, exchanging his blessing for curse.

The underlying problem in this world is not God’s goodness or ability, but our rebellion against his rule. So whatever he does to bless us, he does not because we deserve it, but according to his grace. And we can trust him to do it in his own time and way.

And he will do it. He is committed to his royal vision for creation—to fill the earth with his glorious reputation, and to do so through a people in his image, related to him as children, reflecting his glory and representing his rule. He will make all things right again. And reaffirms that commitment in his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Which brings us back to ch. 17.

God’s Promised King

So how will God fulfill this covenant to Abraham, and reclaim his rightful rule over all the earth? That brings us to what appears at first to be a bit of a throw-away line in v. 6, an example of how extravagant Abraham’s legacy will one day be: “kings shall come from you.” It’s a subtle statement, easily missed. But the rest of Genesis picks up on this phrase as a critical component to *how* God will fulfill his promises to Abraham, and thus his plan for creation. God will raise up a king.

This same phrase is reiterated in God’s promise to Sarah in vv. 15-16: “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; *kings of peoples will come from her*” (17:15-16). In Genesis 21 God finally answers his promise and gives Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac, who himself has a son, Jacob. And listen to what God says to Jacob in Genesis 35:11: “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and *kings shall come from your own body*” (35:11, ESV).

Finally, the promise of a king comes to rest on Jacob’s son, Judah, where it begins to take fuller shape in Genesis 49:10: “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.” Not only will “kings” come from Abraham, but a specific king—one who will receive the obedience of *all* nations, not just Israel.

So much of the Old Testament story is caught up with the question, who is this King? Who is this offspring of Abraham, this royal seed, through whom all nations will be blessed? The one who will reclaim God’s rule over creation and make right everything that’s currently wrong?

We’re going to follow the development of that story over the next two Sundays. But in case there’s any doubt, take a look at how the New Testament opens and closes—keeping in mind these Old Testament promises.

Matthew 1:1—the very first verse of the New Testament: “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Why introduce Jesus as the Son of Abraham? Here is our king.

And listen to Revelation 5, and John’s vision of God in heaven:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?”³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, *the Lion of the tribe of Judah*, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” (Rev. 5:1-5)

The scepter has come to Judah. To the one who has unique authority to accomplish God’s plan for all nations and peoples. But who is this lion, and how has he triumphed? Keep reading: “Then I saw a *Lamb*, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. . . .” (Rev. 5:6). The Seed of Abraham, the Lion of Judah, is the Lamb who was slain. It was through Jesus death on the cross for our sin that he conquered and established God’s kingdom. And so all heaven sings in vv. 9-10: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from *every* tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a *kingdom* and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10).

What God intended from the beginning, what he promised to do through Abraham and his offspring, he accomplished through his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. And he will be faithful to bring his plan to completion in the end; we can trust him to do it in his own time and way—even when we can’t see how it’s all working out. He is the one who is making all things new, the world made right. In him, and only through faith in him, are able to be what God made us to be—a kingdom and priests to our God, who reign with him, as his children, on his behalf, for his glory.