

Trinity United Methodist Church

December 22, 2019

“Under Wraps: God is Faithful”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Have you ever been forgotten? I have. I took piano lessons on late Wednesday afternoons in Hopewell from Miss Chase, who lived up the street from our home church. And usually I would leave her house, go to the end of her driveway and be picked up by Mom or Dad after my piano lesson for the day. And so it was one particular Wednesday that I went to the end of the driveway and I waited, and I waited, and I waited, and I waited some more. You see, also once a month on Wednesdays, the United Methodist Men met for their dinner meeting at church. Mom was in charge of fixing the dinner, coordinating that, and Dad was in some type of leadership position as well. And the one

thought that the other was leaving to run down the street and pick me up. Thankfully, it was only about a mile down the road. Of course, I'm a kid. I didn't think to go back into Miss Chase's house to get her to call the church. Pfft, whatever. I was an older kid, probably Mark's age, by that point, and I knew where the church was, so I walked a mile down this busy road in Hopewell to church. And imagine the look on Mom and Dad's face when I walked in, of (gasp), "We're so sorry!"

But have you ever been *really* forgotten? We assume in the video that this girl's parents are going to show up at any moment, profusely apologizing for forgetting to pick her up, maybe. But maybe not. Maybe, as in too many children's lives these days, this is a pattern. Maybe there will be no apology.

One of our favorite Christmas movies is *Home Alone*, where in the rush to get the whole family out the door for a trans-Atlantic trip, Kevin McAllister is forgotten at home by himself for a week. And it turns out to be every 8-year-old kid's dream.

But then we hear the story of the scary old man who salts the sidewalks in the neighborhood, who turns out to be not so scary when Kevin meets him in church on Christmas Eve and the man tells him he has to go to church on Christmas Eve to sneak a glimpse of his granddaughter, because his son won't talk to him any more. He's not scary, he's forgotten.

There was a viral commercial video on Facebook a number of years ago. It's done in a foreign language, but basically it's an old man sitting at his dining room table alone. And then it cuts to who we presume are his adult children, carrying on with their own busy lives. And in turn each one gets a notification that their dad has died. And so it then cuts back to the dining room and they all walk in around the same time, and they're lamenting their dad being gone, and then he walks out of the kitchen. And they're surprised and they all embrace.

And of course the conviction is, why does it take something like a loved one's or a friend's death to bring people, especially families, together again? Why does it take a tragedy, like 9/11, to unite a country? The problem is, by nature we're forgetful people. It started from the very beginning, when the serpent tempts Eve and tests and confuses her memory of what God said to her. The question is, did God really say that if you eat this fruit, you'll die? Or because you'll become like Him? The bottom is that she and Adam both forgot that God said, point blank, don't eat it to begin with. Never mind the reason why. We fast forward to Chapter 6 of Genesis and we read that essentially all the people of the world had forgotten all about God and turned to their own ways. All except for one man and his family, and that of course is Noah.

Then we fast forward a few more chapters to Genesis 15, and it's a strange scene, but it's actually one of my favorite scenes in the whole Bible. It begins back in

chapter 12, when God calls Abram, who becomes Abraham, to leave all that he knows, and God promises that He will bless Abraham, give him a land in which to dwell, give him many descendants, and God will bless them all. And through them God will do something to bless the entire world. And that promise that God makes with Abraham is called a **covenant**. The word *covenant* is used often in the Bible, but never lightly. It's reserved for only the most solemn and formal agreements that are made in the Bible.

So God says to Abraham, I *covenant* with you. I will bless you, your descendants and through them will do something that will bless the entire world." But Abraham asks, "How? My wife and I are already old. We don't have any kids. I have no heir. So how can I build my life on this promise that you're making with me? How can I make sure that you will keep your word, God?" So God tells Abraham in Genesis 15, "Bring a heifer, a ram, and a goat, and sacrifice them, and then split their carcasses straight up the middle and lay them out side by side." Like I said, it's a pretty weird scene in the Bible. And in Genesis 15 we read, "when then sun had set and the darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces." What's this? What's going on here? You see, at times in the Old Testament, when covenant-making took place, this is what the two parties of the covenant would do. They would sacrifice, they would cut the animals in half. They would lay them out side by side, and the two parties would walk among them. And what they were saying in this symbolic act was this: "May what was done to these animals be done to us if we fail to keep our oath, if we fail to keep our promises that we are making this day."

When we were getting married 15 years ago, I suggested to Bekah that we do this as part of our marriage ceremony. She said no. We did a unity candle instead.

But basically, Abraham asks, "How can I know that you'll keep your promises? How can I know that you'll be faithful to me?" And notice that Abraham doesn't walk among these carcasses. It's only the symbolic presence of God in this firepot and torch that pass between these animals. And God is effectively saying, "May what was done to these animals be done to me, God, if I prove to be unfaithful. If I forget. If I don't keep my promises to you." God basically is saying, "I would rather die than to be unfaithful to you and forget to keep the promises I made."

We're not so familiar with the idea of covenants in our modern world, especially here in America. But what we *are* about, especially here in America, is a good *contract*. Right? We enter into a partnership, we got to get a contract going with each other. But a covenant is very different from a contract.

Rob Renfroe, who is one of the authors of *Under Wraps*, has a great way of explaining the difference between a covenant and a contract. He says, "a contract says, 'If you do this for me, then I promise to do this for you. But if you fail to do what you said

you'd do, then I am no longer under obligation to do what I said I would do.' Whereas a covenant says, 'I bind myself to this promise. I will fulfill these promises regardless of what you do, even if you fail. Even if you forget, I will be faithful.' And Rob says there's some areas of life where a contract is actually preferable. Like for instance if we're building a house. You don't want to tell the architect and the contractors, "I covenant with you. Even if you don't build the house to my specifications, to our agreed-upon dates; even if you don't build me a house at all, I covenant with you that I will pay you this agreed-upon sum of money by such-and-such a date." That makes no sense, does it? Rob says when you're building a house, you need a contract. But if you're building a home, you need a covenant. We don't want a contract that says, "I will love you as long as you bring me happiness. As long as you are easy to love. As long as you are pleasing to me." No, we need a covenant that says, "I will love you for better or for worse, in plenty or in want, in sickness and in health, until we are parted by death."

You see, when we view marriage or life in general, any relationships in life, as a contract, we keep asking, "Am I *getting* what I was promised?" But when we live in a covenant, we should be asking, "Am I *giving* what I promised?"

You see, friends, our God is not a contract God. Our God is a *covenant* God. Our God is not a "I will love you as long as you please me; I will love you as long as you do right; I will love you as long as you walk in my ways" kind of God. God is a covenant God. He's a for-better-or-for-worse kind of God. He says, "I will remain faithful to you even if you are unfaithful to Me. I will love you even when you are difficult to love"—praise Jesus for that. "I will never grow weary of you. I will never walk away. I will be true to you. I will love you forever, even if it kills me," says God.

As we read throughout the rest of the Old Testament, we continue to read of the faithfulness of God in spite of humanity's repeated unfaithfulness and forgetfulness throughout. God gives the law through Moses to try to help us live faithfully, but we continually turn to our own ways and break God's laws. So God sends prophets to speak on His behalf. Some chastise and correct in order to turn us back to God. Some speak comfort and kindness and tenderness, that God's love is not undeterred; it remains constant, faithful and true. But no matter what God does, the story remains the same through the Old Testament, especially. A God who is faithful, and a people who are ungrateful, unworthy, and unfaithful.

So by the end of the Old Testament, it would have been easy enough for God to have said, "That's enough. I've given all I can give. I've done all I can do. I've loved all I can love, and it's never enough for you, so I'm washing my hands. I'm walking away. Goodbye, I'm going to go find someone else who can be faithful." It would have been easy for God to do that if He was a contract God. But our God is a *covenant* God.

A long time, 400 years, had passed between the end of what we have as the Old Testament and the beginning of the New, and once again, God's people were beginning to wonder and to question, "Has God forgotten us? Has God walked away? Is God not going to be faithful and keep His promises?" But just then God sends the angel Gabriel to Mary and to Joseph, a couple who were betrothed to each other, who were pledged and promised and covenanted to each other. Gabriel lets them know that God has chosen them to bring God's son, God of the flesh, into our world. And we might wonder why in Matthew's gospel, that we read today, we read such details about Joseph planning to dismiss the marriage quietly and why the marriage wasn't consummated until after Jesus' birth. It was to show us that this is a man and a young woman who were covenant people. Our covenant God chose covenant people to bring the fulfillment of God's covenant promises into our world. For this babe in Bethlehem would be the one descendent of Abraham through whom the entire world would be blessed. They were to name him Jesus, for He would save the world from their sins.

And Renfro closes with this thought: At the heart of the universe, there is a heart that is faithful and true. And the one who possess that heart has said, "I promise I will not leave you. I will not forsake you. I will not walk away from you. I will not forget you. I will be true to you forever. I will be faithful to you. And I keep my promises, even if it kills me."

With whom are you in a covenant relationship? Maybe it's a marriage covenant. Maybe it's the unwritten, unspoken covenant of family relationships, those that we're born into and those which we choose. Maybe it's the covenant of church membership and discipleship. Are these still life-giving covenants for you? Or have they become contracts? Remember, when we live in covenant we focus on what we're *giving* as we promise. When we live in contracts, we focus on what we're *getting*. This Christmas, perhaps we might be reminded of that original covenant between God and Abraham. And as father Abraham's spiritual descendants, that we would be blessed by God so that the world would be blessed through us, not for our benefit, but for God's glory.

And so with whom do we need to renew our covenant, and who do we need to invite into relationship with our covenant God, this Christmas and always?

Thanks be to God. Amen.