

The Road to Emmaus

Sermon on Luke 24:13-35. Additional reading: Genesis 15:7-18a

24-4-2020

Emmaus

It is Fall 1986. An young couple opens up a Christian counseling center with the idea of “coming alongside”. Coming alongside those who are hurting, confused, mourning, or working through difficulty. They call their counseling center “Emmaus”.

This is inspired by our story of today in Luke 24, where we read of two men who are talking of all the things that had happened (vs. 14). How could it be that their hope for the restoration of Israel had been killed? They must have been hurting, confused, mourning, and working through this difficulty. See the words in v.15: “While they were talking and discussing together, He drew near and went with them”. Tender language, isn't it? He drew near and went with them.

Jesus still draws near those who are hurting, confused, mourning, and working through difficulty. That also goes for you and I, as we sit through this Corona time. And like the men going to Emmaus, we might not be aware of it. We may miss his presence. But that does not keep him from coming alongside.

Jesus pretends that he has no clue and is asking questions. But then the text shifts and he starts to explain. Verse 27 says, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he

interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself". You may know that the Hebrew Bible consists of three parts; the Torah, written by Moses (1), the Prophets (2) and the Writings (3). So when the text says Moses and all the Prophets, he is explaining to them from their own Scriptures the things concerning himself. We are going to do a bit of that. The Road to Emmaus is about 7 miles, so Jesus had 2 hours. I only have 20 minutes so I made a selection from Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the first book of Moses.

We read of Abram, the father of the faith. God enters into a covenant, and we are going to talk about covenant. I have asked Alan how long it's been since he or someone else explained this concept and he told me it's been a while. He also told me to be thorough in my explanation, so brace yourself. I'll answer three questions: what is a covenant, how does it work, and what does it mean for us?

1. What is a Covenant?

Let me first talk a bit about our own understanding of legal commitments by talking about a love relationship. When two people love each other, and the relationship develops in a good direction, they may at some point want to make their love more official. There are, more or less, two ways to do this. Most people in NL and England sign a contract. Samenlevingscontract. You make your financial commitments official, and state what belongs to who. You also make official what happens in case the relationship ends. It is as if you are saying: I love you know, and really hope that I will love you in the time to

come. That is why I am committing myself to these things. But if our love ends, then we have a legal agreement on how to do that well.

The other way to make love official is to get married. The biblical understanding of marriage is that, not of contract, but of covenant. Here you also sign for commitments, and on the surface it seems similar to a contract, a *samenlevingscontract*. But at the heart of biblical marriage, the guiding promise is different. It is as if you are saying: I love you now, and I promise to love you in the future. Whatever may come; I will love you then as I love you today. Marriage always chooses the person over performance.

Over to covenants in the Bible.

Covenants are the backbone of the biblical narrative. There are 6 in total; Adam, Noah, Abram, Sinai, David and the New Covenant. God reveals himself more, shows himself more, with every covenant. It is as with a friendship, where you get to know one another better and better over time. The essence of one's person stays the same, but you get to see a fuller picture. So it is with God and how He shows himself through them. The God in Genesis is the same God in the book of Revelation, but by that time we have a much fuller picture of Him.

Covenants were not unique to only God and Israel. Other people groups in the Ancient Near East used them as well.

The way it usually worked, was that a stronger party would invite a weaker party into a relationship of loyalty. Note the word relationship. It was as if they said: from now on we will be as family to each other. You, me. Your people and my people. For life. There would be great things attached to the covenant; favor, blessing, freedom, protection. But if the covenant would be broken, there would be a curse attached to it. Usually death.

2. How does it work?

A covenant was cut. 4500 years ago in the Ancient Near East, people would be very familiar with butchering animals. We are not, so when we read about animal halves we tend to think it's kind of absurd. Why would God do this? Well, he chooses to reveal himself to people in ways that are familiar to them. If God were to do this today with one of us, He would not ask to cut a few animals in half. Maybe he would ask us to do something with our iPhone, or our bike.

The final stage of cutting a covenant would then be that both parties would walk through the animal halves. They would actively enter into the good things, the blessings, the favor, freedom, protection of the covenant. And they would say to each other: if I do not uphold the covenant, may I be like these animal halves.

Back to the story. When Abram hears God tell him to bring him a heifer, a goat, and other animals (v.9), Abram immediately knows what is going to happen. The stronger party, God, is going to cut a covenant with him. He wants to enter into a relationship with him. He wants Abram to be like

family. God wants Abram to be family, he desires for an exclusive relationship of loyalty. That is the only thing that God wants. He promises Abram to make his name great and give him an offspring as many as the stars in the sky. But here's the thing that makes God's covenant distinct from all other covenants; a deep sleep falls over Abram and God walks through the animal halves himself. Where normally two people would say to each other: if I break this covenant, may happen to me what happened to these animal halves, only God can now say this. Abram is asleep, and when he wakes up he is as family to God. And if one of the parties breaks this loyalty agreement, God will become like the animal halves.

3. What does this mean for us?

We know that Abram and his offspring did break the covenant. It's in the next chapter! His loyalties were soon elsewhere. This also goes for his offspring. And, as the Bible says, we are no different. Our loyalties easily shift from God to something else. The question is, who paid the price? It was God who walked through the animal halves. Romans 5:8 says; "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us". We, like Abram, were asleep. It is comforting that God knows that before we seek our loyalties elsewhere, he already has provided a way back into relationship with him.

Is this promise of God to take the hit in Genesis 15 new? No. Genesis 9 speaks of the covenant with Noah. Genesis 9:13 says: "I have set my bow in the cloud between me and the earth". We know this as the rainbow. But the ESV says bow,

correctly translating the Hebrew here. Noah lived in the time of spears, bow and arrows, so this image makes sense to him. He sees a colorful bow. Imagine this for a minute. Picture a beautiful rainbow, going wide and high from as far as you can see. Now imagine the colors to turn into dark brown. It now is a bow. Imagine that you put a giant arrow into that bow. Pull the string. And release! Where does the arrow go? It doesn't go down, does it? God showed, before Abram, how he would take the hit if the covenant with Noah would be broken. And Noah, like Abram and his offspring, failed to uphold the covenant. Someone had to take the hit.

We now return to the Road to Emmaus. Jesus interprets to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. The arrow of the rainbow hit him. He was "cut in two" on the cross. These things had to happen, so that we always have a way back into relationship with Him.

We live in challenging times in which many of us are tested. For those of us who live by themselves, it may be battling loneliness. For those of us being married, it might be a challenge to find each other, and to love each other well. Let alone parenting, work commitments, fear of sickness, the mourning of lost ones. Know this. God from the very beginning of his walk with mankind, made the way to himself open. There is nothing that can keep you away from his presence. Allow him to open your eyes to his presence today and in the week to come.

Amen.