

# OUR HOPE: A COVENANT GOD

For the past seven weeks you have been looking at  
 what many commentators believe to be the  
 greatest book of the Old Testament.  
 And understandably so.

No other book before the time of Christ  
 gives us a more glorious vision of God than we find in chapter 6  
 when the prophet sees the Lord High and Lifted up,  
 seated on a throne,  
 the train of his robe filling the temple,  
 surrounded by seraphim,  
 calling out, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty.”

No other book better describes  
 the depravity and the sins of Israel  
 and what that does to the heart of the God who loves them.

No other book provides more prophetic passages  
 about the Servant of the Lord,  
 who will come to suffer for the salvation of his people.

No other book in the Old Testament  
 does more to preview and to present  
 the Gospel that is made real in the life, death and resurrection  
 of Jesus Christ.

If you recall,  
 the book begins with an indictment.

## **Isaiah 1.2-4:**

Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth!

For the LORD has spoken:

I reared children and brought them up,  
 but they have rebelled against me.

Woe to the sinful nation,

a people whose guilt is great,  
 a brood of evildoers,

children given to corruption!  
 They have forsaken the LORD;  
 they have spurned the Holy One of Israel.  
 Isaiah begins by calling the heavens and the earth,  
     to be his witnesses.  
 He summons all of creation to see and to agree that  
     Israel has greatly and grievously sinned  
     and is deserving of judgment.

The book begins with an indictment.  
 But it concludes with a promise.  
 God says:

**Isaiah 61.8-9:** In my faithfulness I will make  
     an everlasting covenant with them.  
 Their descendants will be known among the nations  
     and their offspring among the peoples.  
 All who see them will acknowledge  
     that they are a people the LORD has blessed.

The final word of Isaiah is a word of hope.  
 It's the promise of forgiveness, redemption and restoration.

It would be easy to think,  
     well, it starts out bad,  
     but it ends good.  
 Nice little story,  
     why did you need 66 chapters to tell it?

Kind of like the man who had lived his life apart from God  
     and was asked on his deathbed if he feared eternity.  
 He responded,  
     Not really.  
     I like sinning.  
     God likes forgiving.  
     It's a match made in heaven.  
 Oh, if only it were as easy as that.  
 But the story that Isaiah tells  
     is anything but easy.  
 It is a story of pain and suffering.

Both for God and for his people.  
 It is a story of sin so great that it cannot be ignored  
 and of a love so deep it cannot walk away.

Let's go back to the beginning.

Chapter 1,  
 the indictment.  
 Israel has sinned against God.  
 Idolatry. Injustice. Immorality.  
 They have become corrupt,  
 a brood of evildoers,  
 a nation whose sin is great.

And God tells them that judgment is coming.  
 They will be overrun and taken into captivity.

They will cry out and ask if God is no longer able to protect them.  
 But Isaiah tells them that the problem is not with God,  
 but with them.

Isaiah 59.1-2: Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,  
 nor his ear too dull to hear.  
 But your iniquities have separated  
 you from your God;  
 your sins have hidden his face from you,  
 so that he will not hear.

Isaiah tells Israel:  
 God cannot bless your sin.  
 He will not reward your unfaithfulness.  
 He will not protect you from the consequences of your rebellion.

But he will not leave you there.

For God has promised:  
 I will remember you,  
 I will restore you and  
 I will bless you.  
 I will keep the covenant I have made to be your God

and to bring blessing out of your brokenness.

The word covenant is used 12 times in Isaiah.  
 It's used over and over throughout the Old Testament.  
 But it is never used lightly.  
 It is reserved for formal agreements of a most serious nature.  
 So much so that oaths and vows must be taken.

It's easy to get contracts and covenants confused.  
 A contract says if you do something for me,  
     I will do something for you.  
 But if you fail to live up to your part of the bargain,  
     I am no longer bound to fulfill my part of the deal.

But a covenant is different.  
 It's a statement that what I promise today,  
     I will fulfill.  
 Regardless of what you do.  
 Whether or not you are faithful to your vow,  
     I will keep the oath I am making to you.

Look at the promise again near the end of Isaiah.

**Isaiah 61.8-9:** In my faithfulness I will make an everlasting covenant  
     with my people.  
 All who see them will acknowledge  
     that they are a people the LORD has blessed.

If you are faithful to me, God says,  
     I will bless you.  
 If you are **unfaithful** to me, God says,  
     I will –  
     I will find a way,  
     I will make a way to bless you.

The covenant that God made with Israel,  
     beginning with Abraham,  
     and that is restated in the latter chapters of Isaiah –

what does it mean for the people of God –  
for the Israelites and for us?

Please hear this.

Our God is not a contract God.  
He is not an I will be faithful to you  
until you fail me,  
until you are difficult to love,  
until you are costly to care for kind of God.

Our God is a covenant God.  
He is a for better or for worse kind of God.  
He is an I'm not going anywhere kind of God.  
He is a you can fail me and fail yourself,  
but I will not fail or forsake you kind of God.  
He is a God who keeps his promises  
not because we are faithful  
but because he is faithful.

He was that kind of God for Israel  
and he is that kind of God for you.

What does that mean?

First, it means

**You are not alone.**

I know some of you feel that no one cares about you.

It breaks my heart,  
but some of you grew up in a family  
and no one really  
valued you,  
treasured you,  
delighted in you and your gifts.  
And you wonder even now  
if anyone truly does.

Some of you grew up feeling different.  
 You weren't like the other kids.  
 You didn't fit in.  
 You felt no one understood you.  
 And you lived with a deep loneliness within your soul.  
 Maybe you still do.

Some of you,  
     you grew up in a dysfunctional family.  
 And it was all too clear that you were on your own.  
 And it still feels that way today.

But God has promised.  
 God has made a covenant  
     that he is with you and he will not leave you.

**Isaiah 49.15-16:** Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has carried? Though she may forget you, I will not forget you. See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

Mothers, what would it take,  
     what would have to happen,  
 for you to walk away and forget  
     the child that you love more than life?

The child you once carried and nursed.  
 The child that you dreamed of and prayed for  
     before he or she was ever born.  
 The child that you rocked to sleep at night,  
     and cared for when he or she was sick.  
 The child that has brought you more joy than any material possession  
     or earthly accomplishment ever has?  
 What would your child have to do for you to walk away and quit caring?

God says even if you do what would make your mother forget you,  
     even if her love fails and she forsakes you,  
     my love for you will remain.

Listen to me.

You would never have to face a dark night,  
or a cold world,  
or a lost cause alone.

There is someone who is looking down and smiling on you.  
Someone who understands you.  
Someone who knows your fears and remembers your sorrows.  
Someone who knew you before you knew yourself,  
and no matter where you've wandered  
or what you done,  
he has promised,  
he has covenanted to walk through this world with you  
all the way to the end.  
You are not alone and you never will be.

When I was here the first time many years ago,  
I met Velma Griffin,  
one of our members,  
80 years old.

She had a dear face with a broad smile.  
She moved slowly but had a quick wit.  
Short gray hair with just a little curl.  
I liked Velma,  
and for some strange reason she loved me.

Velma became ill.  
Really, she just started wearing out.

She stayed in a hospital bed for two months.  
At first she could sit up and eat and make a joke.  
But the weeks passed,  
and finally she couldn't lift her head  
and had to be fed through a tube.

Saddest of all,  
Velma was pretty much alone.  
No children.

Her husband was dead.  
Her two or three living friends were frail,  
and couldn't get out to see her.

Only a few days before her death  
Velma had a particularly bad night.  
Her breathing stopped over and over.

That morning I knelt down beside her bed  
and pretended to scold her.  
Velma, you gave us quite a scare last night.  
You even frightened the doctors.  
I want you to stop that.

Did I tell you that Velma was a Christian?  
Not a Sunday morning Christian,  
but a woman who walked with Jesus as if he were her best friend.

She said to me, "Well, I'm sorry if you were scared,  
but I wasn't."  
"Oh, no," I said,  
"how come you're so brave."

She answered me by quoting Isaiah 41.13:  
For I the Lord your God will hold thy right hand,  
saying unto thee, "Fear not, I will help you."

Then she said: He was here with me the whole time.

That night Velma looked death right in the face  
and it didn't scare her at all.

All alone with no one beside her.  
No one to hold her hand.

It would have been so easy for her to be afraid,  
but she wasn't.



Let life take your dreams.  
 Let life take your health.  
 Let life take your finances.  
 Let life take your ability to understand  
     why the night is so dark and the road is so long.  
 But don't ever let it take from you  
     the certainty that God knows you,  
     God loves you and  
     God is with you.

God's covenant means something else.

### You can be forgiven

You can begin again,  
     you can be washed cleaned,  
     you can become right with God.

No matter what you have done,  
     no matter how far you have fallen,  
     no matter where you have wandered,  
     no matter what you have given yourself to,  
 A good friend of mine in high school  
     was always a good bit wilder than I was.  
 But after he accepted Jesus,  
     his heart was so sincere and pure –  
         seeing the change in him  
     was one of the things that led me to Christ.

We went to the same church growing up  
     and then stayed in contact when we went to different colleges.  
 I became involved in a Christian group on campus  
     and grew in my faith.

Marshall didn't.  
 In fact, he embraced his "wild side,"  
     and lived the party life.

Charming and handsome,  
he slept with many women (whom he'd later say he used),  
took lots of drugs and  
often drank to excess.

He walked away from the faith  
though there was always the thought lurking in the back of his mind  
that what he was doing was wrong –  
that he was guilty and needed to change.

A good friend of his at school was a committed Christian.  
Terry loved Marshall as much as I did.  
He could see the struggle within Marshall –  
enticed by sin and yet feeling tormented by the way he was living.

One day after a game of basketball in the hot Texas sun,  
they went to the locker room to take a shower.  
The soap and the hot water washed over them,  
removing the dirt and the sweat and the stench from their bodies.

They picked up warm, terry-cloth towels and began to dry off.  
“Marshall,” Terry whispered.  
“What?” Marshall responded, not looking up.  
“Marshall.”  
“What?”  
“Marshall!”  
“What is it?” Marshall said, turning to his friend.  
Terry was holding the white towel to his face.  
He breathed in and said, “Marshall, it sure feels good to be clean.”

It sure feels good to be clean.  
To know that you have been forgiven.  
To feel the dirt and the stench washed away  
and to have a new start in life.

Brother.  
Brother.  
It sure feels good to be clean.

What does Isaiah promise?

**Isaiah 1.18:** Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

Back in the old days when we were at 3901 South Panther Creek we had a punch policy.

It was this – no red punch was to be served at any church event. Why?

Because if someone spilled it,  
you could never get it out of the carpet.  
It was there forever.

What does God tell us?  
When you think your sins have stained your soul  
so deeply, so horribly that they can never be removed,  
I will forgive you,  
I will cleanse you,  
I will make you white as snow.

Go back to the original covenant God made  
with Abraham to bless him and his descendants.  
He tells Abraham,  
I will bless you,  
I will give you many descendants,  
I will bless them  
and through them all peoples will be blessed.

After God tells Abram that he will bless him and his descendants,  
Abraham asks how can he be sure that God will do what he has promised?  
God instructs Abram to bring a heifer,  
a goat and  
a ram,  
to cut them in two,  
and to separate the two halves with a space in between.

That's where we pick up the story.

**Genesis 15.12, 17-18:** As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram ...

What's going on here?

God is making a covenant with Abram,  
we're told that.

But what about the carcasses and the burning torch?

On occasion when a covenant was made,  
animals were sacrificed,  
their carcasses divided,  
and the parties making the covenant would walk between them.

And the inherent agreement was this:

May what has been done to these animals be done to me  
if I fail to keep the covenant I have made with you.

And that's what is happening here.

Abram asks God;

How can I be certain you will keep your covenant?  
How can I know you will honor your promises?  
How can I be sure and base my entire life on the belief  
that you will be faithful to your word?

And to answer Abram's questions,  
the presence of God symbolized by a burning torch  
passes between the carcass,

and in essence God says,

I the Lord your God  
will die before I fail to be faithful.

May what has been done to these animals  
be done to me if I do not honor my promises  
and keep my word.

If you know anything about the Old Testament,  
     you know that Israel's rebellion in the time of Isaiah was nothing new.  
 No sooner did God bring the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt,  
     than they worshipped a golden calf and rebelled.  
 Not long after bringing them into the promised land,  
     they bowed down to foreign gods.  
 When they are attacked and plundered,  
     he raises up deliverers like Gideon and Deborah to defeat their enemies.

And all throughout,  
     he sends prophets to call his people back to himself.  
 But no matter what he tries,  
     the story is a loving, faithful God,  
     forgotten and rejected by an ungrateful people.

It would have been so easy.  
 To give up,  
     walk away,  
 and say, "I've done all I can do,  
     I've given all I can give,  
     I've loved all that I can love."

But our God is not a contract God.  
 He is a covenant God  
     who says I will die before I stop  
     loving you and wanting you and seeking for you.

And so God stepped into the world in the person of Jesus  
     on a day that we will soon celebrate.  
 To keep a promise.  
 To be faithful to covenant he had made.  
 To make atonement for our transgressions  
     so our scarlet stain could be washed white as snow.

I have wondered if I could have done it.  
 Send my Son,  
     the One I loved,  
     into the world knowing what he would have to endure.

Could I have watched as the nails were driven into his hands  
and the spikes into his feet?  
And have done nothing.

Could I have listened as evil men gathered around him on the cross,  
naming him a fool,  
calling him cursed, and  
laughing at his shame.

All this done to  
my son  
my joy,  
my heart –  
who had done nothing but love.

And then in his lowest moment,  
as he saw the dark shadow fall near  
and the felt the breath of death upon his neck,  
he cries out,  
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

His friends are gone.  
His disciples have left.  
And now he thinks I have forgotten him.

Could I have stayed my hand,  
remained silent,  
and refuse to save his life?

And for what?  
To honor a promise,  
to keep a commitment,  
to be faithful to a man named Abraham  
and to the people who had been so unfaithful,  
and to and undeserving, lost and ugly world,  
to whom I had said,  
I will be faithful.  
I will love you even if it kills me.

Me – yes,  
     but my son?

I don't know.

In one of Dostoyevsky's novels,  
     a character stares at a painting of the crucifixion.  
 And the horror of what happened on the cross  
     grips his mind and his heart.  
 The physical suffering,  
     the emotional torment,  
     the spiritual agony.  
 And he realizes that the Father allowed it to happen to his Son.

The man turns to his companion and says,  
     “A man could lose his faith looking at a picture like that.”

Who wants to worship a God who allows this terrible evil to happen?  
     A God who doesn't love his Son any more than that?

The lesson to be learned at the cross is no that God does not love his Son.  
 The lesson to be learned is that he loves you.

The message of the cross is not that God is not faithful to his Son.  
 The message is God is faithful to keep his word.  
 He is a covenant God  
     who does not walk away when loving us is hard,  
     he sacrifices what he holds most dear to win our hearts.

He is a God who has made a way  
     for your sins to be forgiven,  
     for your soul to be saved and  
     for you to know – it sure feels good to be clean.

## You can be at peace

I've been a pastor for a long time now.  
And one thing I've learned is that people struggle to be at peace  
with themselves.

Even people who know that God is with them.  
Even people who know they have been forgiven.

There is this nagging fear that tells them

I'm not enough.  
I don't have what it takes.  
There's something wrong with me.  
There's something more I need to do,  
something more I need to be,  
before I can relax and be at peace.

I think that fear gets implanted in most of us pretty early in life.  
It can come from

The failures we experience.  
The abuse we suffer.  
The rejection we feel.  
The secrets we hide.

So, we start playing roles.

**SUPERACHIEVER – THAT'S A ROLE THAT MANY OF YOU IN  
HERE DECIDED TO PLAY.  
IN SCHOOL IT WAS SPORTS OR MUSIC OR ACADMEMICS.  
LATER IN LIFE IT WAS BUSINESS.  
DO MORE AND BE BETTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE.  
THEN, YOU THOUGHT, I'LL BE GOOD ENOUGH.**



Some of us become the fixer or the rescuer.  
SOLVE EVERYONE else's PROBLEMS,  
MAKE EVERYTHING OK for others.  
THEN I'LL BE APPRECIATED AND LOVED.

Some of us play or the victim or the good kid or the clown.

AND THE HOPE IS THAT IF I CAN BECOME SOMEONE  
WHO DOES ENOUGH  
AND IS ENOUGH  
THEN OTHERS WILL LOVE ME.  
AND WHEN THEY DO, THEN I CAN LOVE MYSELF.

BUT TRYING TO BECOME SOMEONE ELSE  
NEVER WORKS.

BECAUSE YOU CAN'T BE AT PEACE WITH YOURSELF  
WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO BE SOMEONE YOU'RE NOT.  
YOU CAN'T ACCEPT YOURSELF  
WHEN YOU'RE RUNNING AWAY FROM YOURSELF.  
YOU CAN'T FEEL AUTHENTIC  
WHEN YOUR LIFE IS INAUTHENTIC.

THAT'S WHY YOU CAN PLAY SUPER ACHIEVER  
AND IT'S NEVER ENOUGH TO TAKE AWAY THE PAIN.  
THAT'S WHY YOU CAN BE THE CARETAKER  
AND DO EVERYTHING FOR EVERYONE  
AND STILL FEEL LIKE NOTHING.  
THAT'S WHY YOU CAN PLAY THE CLOWN  
AND HAVE EVERYONE LAUGHING  
AND WHEN YOU'RE AT HOME ALONE YOU'RE DYING INSIDE.

Let me finish the story I began telling you about my friend Marshall.  
I wish I could tell you that after Terry said to him: it sure feels good to be clean  
that he changed his life and came back to Jesus.  
But he didn't.

He lived the same way.  
Self-centered and promiscuous.  
He became enamored with a woman in Mexico  
who followed what we used to call a New Age guru.  
A shaman of sorts.  
And he sat in with her as she listened to him.

But instead of joy,  
he became depressed and worried.  
His health began to fail him.  
This was when people were first being diagnosed with HIV and AIDS  
and he wondered if his promiscuity had caught up with him.  
He looked at his life  
and he wondered how he could have done everything he wanted to do  
and yet have so little peace in his life.

One afternoon he was in the woman's hacienda,  
listening to the guru when the man looked at Marshall.  
Whether the woman had said something or the man was perceptive,  
he looked at Marshall and said,  
"I can see that you are trouble in spirit  
and that you have lost heart.  
Follow me and my teachings,  
and you will have the fullness of life."

Where it came from I don't know,  
but he looked at the man and said,  
I don't know if I'll ever follow anyone ever again,  
but if I do, it won't be you.  
It will be Jesus Christ.

Shortly afterwards,  
    he gave his life to Jesus again  
        and has served him faithfully now for three decades.

I once asked him,  
    what brought you back to the faith.

He said,  
    I studied all the world's religions.  
    They all have something that's helpful to learn,  
        some insight,  
        some truth.  
    But I learned that I didn't need more truth to live up to,  
        I needed a Savior for the times I couldn't live up to the truth I knew.  
    And only Christianity has a Savior.  
    Only Christianity has Jesus.

Friends, if you have accepted Jesus,  
    you have a Savior.  
That means you don't have to save yourself.

You don't have to be the hero.  
You don't have to take care of everyone else.  
You don't have to impress others or leave them laughing.

You don't have to be anyone other than who you are to be at peace.

You are enough right now.  
He has promised to  
    bless you,  
    provide for you,  
    use you and  
    make your life good.

He is your Savior,  
     not you.  
 So you can be at peace.

Trust him,  
     receive his promise.  
 Take a breath,  
     release your fear, and  
     be at peace.

Let it go.  
 Whatever it is.  
 Shame.  
 Fear.  
 Hurt.  
 All the messages you were given about yourself.  
 All the names that were put on you – loser, strange, different, unwanted.  
 The way you thought life was going to be.

Breathe in and be at peace.

If time:

Tommy was a rough man.  
 He lived in the country with his wife  
     and her daughter.  
 He started coming to First United Methodist Church in Atlanta Texas  
     when I was the pastor there.  
 Most of the folks who attended that church were professionals and business  
     owners,  
 bankers and doctors and lawyers and dentists.

Tommy didn't exactly fit in.  
 He was a laborer and a farmer.  
 Once when I went to see him,  
     he told me, "I don't know how old to expect to live to."

Why's that I asked him.

Well, he said,

I was just up at the family cemetery,  
cleaning it up.

And none of the men in family have ever died of natural causes.

He said it with a little laugh.

But he wasn't joking.

Tommy was different, though.

He had accepted Christ  
and his life had changed.

He was a good husband  
and a good father  
and a good man  
and a good member of our church.

I remember getting the call  
that his wife's daughter who lived with them  
and who he had raised as his own daughter  
had been in an accident.

Late at night,  
her date pulled up behind a car that had stopped at a railroad crossing.  
And God only knows what he was thinking,  
but he pulled around the car in front of him  
and the arm of the railroad crossing gate,  
and the speeding train probably didn't even see the car  
before it slammed into the passenger door.

Suzy was placed on life support,  
and after a week the decision was made to let her go.  
I had seen the family at the hospital and prayed with them.

But I dreaded this last visit.

What would I say?

How could I help them process what had happened?

We prayed in a private waiting room before they went in to see Suzy  
for the last time.

As we opened our eyes,

Tommy looked up at me and said,  
Rob, there's something I can't figure out.

Here it comes, I thought,  
the question I dreaded,  
the why did it happen question that I had no answer to.

I'm about to go in there and let my daughter die.  
It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do.  
Just thinking about it rips my heart out.  
I wouldn't do it if there was any other way.

And the question I've been wrestling with is this.  
God did the very same thing with Jesus.  
He let him die because he loved me.  
I just can't figure out why he would love me the way he does.