

On Sunday morning we talked about a difficult passage. One of the things I lamented was that God didn't orchestrate things for Hagar in the manner that seems best to me based on my 21st-century view of how a victim should be cared for. As I thought about it, I floated the idea that God was acting within what *was* while working towards what *will* be. Today we're going to spend some more time thinking about the idea that what is today may not be what will be or even should be tomorrow, but that maybe that is okay. And maybe it is more than okay, it is amazing! How does embracing this idea of progress over arrival impact our approach to scripture, to God, and to ourselves? That's today on The Covenant Weekly podcast season 2 episode 16 X→Y→Z Part 1.

Theme Music

It is easy, when reading the Bible, to forget that it was written in a particular place and time that was very different than our own. And often, the time and place it was written in were very different than the place and time of the events being described. And even within the Bible, there are times when writers affirm what had happened in the past. Other times they critique it. There are times they affirm it *for the time that it had happened* but suggest that movement forward calls for something new in their new place and time. There seems to be progress and change on many topics and issues even within the pages of scripture.

This can make it really hard for someone who has been taught that their primary approach to working out the Christian faith is to "obey the Bible." (And I suspect many of us have been taught to do just that.) But what does it mean to obey the Bible when the Bible itself shifts and changes and moves depending on the time and place the particular book or letter was written in? We have to, in the words of one book wrestling with this question, move "Beyond the Bible to Theology." One of the contributors to that book was a professor of mine who observed the shifts in perspective that take place in the Bible. He noticed that most often what was taught in one time and place, when held up against ideas and practices in the world around it at the same time and place, said things about God or humanity or ethical practice that stood apart from the rest of the world. The belief or practice put forward in scripture was closer to the way of love, the way of Jesus, than what the world around it believed or practiced. In a later part of scripture, when the same topic was addressed differently, very

often the new biblical approach to things moved even further in the direction of love - what we see taught by Jesus. Even in the New Testament, after Jesus' death and resurrection, when we see movement forward it is made in the direction of Jesus.

Bill Webb suggests that this movement is very intentional. He calls it Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic and it is pointing us forward *beyond the Bible* in the direction of what is ultimately true about God, about humanity, or about ethics. If we represent what is first taught with the letter X, we can observe progression related to its original context. When we look at a later time in scripture, very often we see movement then as well. The later teaching can be represented with the letter Y. X progresses beyond its place and time. Y progresses beyond its place and time. But Y also progresses beyond X. There is a trajectory from X towards Y. But it also reasons that Y is not an endpoint. The trajectory doesn't go from X to Y. It goes from X *through* Y and continues to point forward to what Webb describes as an ultimate ethic or what is ultimately true.

There are huge implications of this for engaging with the Bible. It becomes something that we engage with to get pointed in the right direction and not a static text to be blindly obeyed. It gives us a tool to resolve apparent conflict within the Bible on given issues. And it can help us engage honestly with things that, if we had to accept that it was God's plan for all time, would seem unacceptable to us.

I know this can sound very academic and digging into *how* we read the Bible can feel very challenging even if we think it is important. But thinking about things this way not only impacts how we engage with the Bible, it says something radical about God. It affirms the idea that God works within what *is* while working towards what *will be*.

The picture we have of God in the Bible is not a being who acts the same towards all people at all times. There are those who suggest that *because* God never changes, God's way of acting and speaking can never change. That simply doesn't seem to be the case. If God acts within what is while working towards what will be, our unchanging God seems very likely to act and speak in ways that change as an accommodation to those of us who can only exist within

our time and place. This is a powerful demonstration of love shown to people throughout biblical history. But it also suggests that God does that for us. And it seems likely that God does it both at the macro-level (within cultures and histories) and at micro-levels - meeting us in what we need in our personal lives. This is not to say that God is whatever we want God to be or whatever we make God out to be. It is not to say that God's ethical desires change based on our whims and preferences. I'm convinced that we can easily wander beyond the character of God as revealed in Jesus. We need to keep the character and teaching of Jesus central to discerning the ways God is meeting us today and calling us to live ethically today. All the while recognizing that Jesus lived and taught in a particular place and time so there is still work to be done to discern God's ultimate ethic by following the direction Jesus points us in!

For some, I know that this way of understanding scripture and understanding God can be hard to consider because it flies in the face of what some parts of the church have argued for the past hundred years. But perhaps the picture of God it paints for us can help overcome some of the fears we may have. When we walk through scripture with this perspective we find a God who is so loving that he has been meeting people within their context since the dawn of time. We find a God who is here and doing the same for us today.

Transition Music

On this topic of things moving slowly from what we *is* towards *what will be*, there are some things that can be helpful to us on Sundays that we haven't got back to doing again yet. I'd like to highlight three of them and invite you to consider if you could be involved with helping a couple of those things happen.

1. As a part of keeping our kids safe, we are supposed to have a sign in and sign out procedure for them on Sunday. In our slow return back to in person gatherings this hasn't restarted yet, but we are getting ready to do it in the next couple of weeks. When you come in, perhaps this Sunday or perhaps next, there will be a sign in computer for kids and youth. Parents (or the older kids themselves) will sign their kids in for that morning and a sticker will be printed. One part of the sticker goes on the child for the morning. The other part is kept by a parent or guardian. After the service, the parent or guardian with the sticker will go and pick the

kids up and the kids will get signed out. Sometimes in smaller churches like ours it is easy to think, “We all know each other. Is it really necessary?” And the answer is that we hope it isn’t, but we would rather be safe in having this extra layer of protection for our kids than to see something horrible happen. So watch for that system in our lobby in the next couple of weeks. Someone should be with it, when it is set up, to help people get oriented with it.

2. A second thing we’d love to bring back is a team of greeters. Basically, a greeters team is two people who welcome people at the door, help point them in the right direction for things, and answer questions they may have. Greeters could point new people toward the kids’ registration for example. Or could point them towards some seats if they are looking for where to sit. Or could point them toward the washrooms. The position is a mix of host and guide for the 25 minutes before the service and probably 5 minutes as the service gets rolling. We have one couple who is ready to both be a team and coordinate with others. We’d love to have four teams working on rotation so if you would be willing to do this once every four weeks, you can talk to Terry Dupuis if you have his contact info or you can reach out to me (jon@covenantchurch.ca) and I’ll connect you with Terry.
3. The third thing we are looking to resume on a regular basis is serving coffee and tea on Sunday mornings. Letitia has agreed to coordinate this, but we don’t want one person doing it all each week. We’ll be working to figure out ways to keep this simple for those who are making the coffee and cleaning up, but it does take some work. If you’re interested, again, you can talk to Letitia or reach out to me as we look to build a team to do this on a rotating basis. One suggestion I have, to help save some work for those making coffee each week, is to bring your own mug! It could be a short, tumbler-like travel mug that will fit under our coffee carafes or it could be just a regular coffee mug that you want to bring with you on Sundays! If people bring their own, that is less cleaning for those making the coffee and better than using a disposable cup!

We’ll see how well we progress in getting these things going again. We’re not where we wanna be, but we’re working our way there slowly together.

Next week, we’re going to get into part two of this idea of embracing progress and God’s presence with us each day. But for now, as you go, may you be

encouraged by the reminder that God is with you today. In your time, in your place, God is with you.

God Bless. Go in peace.

Theme Music