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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Lent 3
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, as we know, we call the first half of our Bible the "Old Testament," and the second half the "New Testament."

And maybe we have wondered "why" that is the case.

Or, maybe it has never crossed our minds, until right now.

But, why is it that we have an "old" and a "new" testament?

I mean, if we have a "new" testament, why do we bother with the "old."

If we get a "new" something, we pitch the old, right?

If we get say a "new" car, we don't bother to continue driving the old one, especially if our old car is falling apart, is unsafe, or is need of constant repair.

And, if we get a "new" job, we don't continue showing up at our former place of business, especially if our former employer is no longer giving us a paycheck.

And if we get a "new" residence, we don't continue to return our former address each day to lounge on the couch and watch TV.

The new residents might find that a bit problematic.

No, if we acquire some "new" thing, we usually put the old to bed, as they say.

But not so, with the Bible.

We have an "old" testament and we have a "new" testament, even though it makes it sound like the first half of the Bible is antiquated, outdated, and obsolete, like it should be tossed out.

To be sure, it makes better sense to call the Old and New Testaments, the “First” Testament and the “Second” Testament, or the “Former” Testament and the “Latter” Testament.

But on second thought, that makes it sound like the Old Testament is supreme because it is the first and it is the former.

And the New Testament then is not as significant because it comes in second or arrived later.

It is like the sequel in a movie franchise; it is never as good as the original, right?

Even so, maybe our Holy Scriptures should just be called The Bible: Part 1 and Part 2.

But, regardless of what we do with the “old” and “new” terminology, what I want us to focus on today is the word “testament.”

The “new” and “old” verbage aside, what are we talking about when we Christians say that our Scriptures contain two testaments?

What is a testament anyway?

And what testaments are we specifically referring to with respect to the “old” testament and the “new” testament?

PAUSE

Now, when we hear that word “testament” we might be inclined to think of the phrase “Last Will and Testament,” referring to what a person wants done with their estate in the event of their death.

“Will” refers specifically to what is a person’s desire, their hope for something to be accomplished, their determination regarding what they say, that it would be done.

That is one’s “will.”

And “testament” then is that which the deceased wants done.

It is their promise, their oath, their pledge...to bequeath such and such to such and such.

“Testament” is another word then for “covenant,” which we have described in the previous two sermons as a pact, agreement, or promise.

A covenant is a pact, an agreement, a promise. Or, another word for it is testament.

So, in short we could rename the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as the Old and New Covenants.

And, so, sisters and brothers in Christ, what is the old covenant that is referred to in the first half our Bible, and what is the new covenant in the second half?

Well, very simply the old covenant, or first covenant, or former covenant is this.

God will be the God of the Jews, and the Jews will be God’s people.

God promises to be the God of his people the Jews.

That is the covenant.

And how this covenant is maintained by Jews is by their keeping of the Law.

Indeed, sometimes we will hear the phrase the “Law of the Covenant.”

And the Law being referred to here is none other than the Ten Commandments and the entire Law contained in the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

The Torah is the Law of God, and at its heart is the Ten Commandments.

PAUSE

This morning, we heard a reading of the Ten Commandments.

And so, on this third Sunday then in this season of Lent, we are reminded of yet another Biblical covenant.

It is the covenant God made with Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai, when God gave them the Law.

God had freed his people from bondage in Egypt, and God then makes a covenant with his liberated people.

God has freed his people, God claims as much in this morning’s reading.

God identifies God's self, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

"Which God?" The Israelites might have wondered.

The God who liberated them from slavery in Egypt.

God identifies God self, and then God gives the Ten Commandments...

God gives the Law to Moses and to his people the Israelites, so that they then can identify themselves.

They are the people of the covenant.

They are the people of the Law.

And the Law was so important, still is important, to Jewish identity.

The Law is so central to whom the Jews understand themselves to be.

And in ancient times, because the law was so important the Jews made a special container for the Law, and covered this container with gold, and call it the "ark of the covenant."

In truth, the ark of the covenant was nothing more than a box containing stone tablets inscribed with their law code.

The Israelites traveled around with this box and marched it out when they confronted their enemies.

The law was everything to our ancient ancestors.

For the law represented the covenant between God and themselves.

The law was the embodiment of their relationship with their God.

The law was the sign, the symbol, the tangible, visual representation of the Jews' relationship with God.

I tried to think of something comparable to the ark of the covenant, and the best I could come up with is the social security card or the birth certificate.

In my home, my wife and I keep ours and our kids' social security cards and birth certificates in a small locked, fire proof safe. In essence, we are storing paper in a box, which is only slightly different from keeping stone tablets in a box.

If intelligent beings from another solar system were ever to discover the remnants of the human race, after our species is no more...I have to wonder what they would think of all our little boxes containing treasures like paper and stone and so forth.

Be that as it may, let me get back to what I was saying.

The law was everything to our Jewish ancestors, and still is today.

And the Old Testament prophets' complaints against the people in their culture was always about the covenant.

The prophets decry the disobedience of God's people.

The prophets denounce the waywardness of God's people.

In essence, the prophets are forever complaining that God's people have broken the covenant God made with them, because they had broken the law.

Either they were worshipping other gods.

Or they were neglecting the Sabbath.

Or they were taking advantage of their more vulnerable neighbors—the poor, the widow.

Yes, the prophets voiced their complaints.

Over and over again we hear it in the Old Testament.

And no wonder then God decides to do a new thing.

No wonder then God decides to create a new covenant not just with God's people, the Jews, but with all of God's people.

No wonder then God decides to send his son Jesus.

And this is the new covenant. It is the new testament.

The relationship between God and God's people is not embodied anymore in stones tablets inscribed by the Law, but is now embodied in a person Jesus Christ.

The relationship between God and God's people is represented in Jesus, and most specifically in Jesus' suffering and death on a cross.

Indeed, the early Church referenced this new covenant embodied in Jesus, represented in his suffering and death.

The early Church referenced this new covenant in the holy sacrament, which remembers Christ's suffering and death.

The words of the early Church said during communion, which we say still today, are these:

In the night in which he was betrayed our Lord took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it for all to eat saying, "This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

And then, again after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying, "This cup is the NEW COVENANT in my blood, which is shed for you, and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me."

The communion meal is a remembrance of the new covenant God has made with all people, through his Son, and his suffering and death.

So, whereas the Old Testament is about the law of the covenant, embodied in the Ten Commandments, the New Testament is about the covenant embodied in Jesus Christ.

But it is not that the old covenant is now null and void, and so we forget about it.

No, we don't write off the law.

But instead we are to understand that the old covenant is fulfilled.

Jesus Christ faithfully fulfills all that the law of the Ten Commandments commands, all that the law of the Torah commands.

Jesus accomplishes what no human could accomplish, the perfect keeping of the law.

He fulfills God's will fully, even the will of God that he should suffer and die that we might have new life.

So the law is not abandoned now that Christ has come.

But Jesus does redefine the law.

Jesus teaches us that to keep the law is live by love.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, body, and soul.

And love your neighbor as yourself.

We then fulfill the law if we live by love.

And so we still need the Old Testament to teach us the Law about how we specifically live out love.

Love means honoring God, God's name, God's holy day.

Love means caring for the life, the well-being, of our neighbor, helping them with their physical needs.

Love means caring for our own marriage, and supporting our neighbors in their marriage.

Love means helping our neighbor protect what is theirs, and love means always speaking well of our neighbor.

Love means blessing our neighbor in whatever way we can.

Yes, the law helps us specifically live out our mandate from Jesus to be people who love.

PAUSE

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, this is then what we mean by the Old and New Testaments.

It is two really versions of the same covenant God makes with God's people.

God gave God's people the law thinking that this would teach people how to love their neighbor.

But the law only revealed our sin, which is necessary, so that we can repent and live in Christ.

Now that Christ has come, and has fulfilled the law, we know what it is to love.

We now know what it means to fulfill the law of the covenant, which is to love God and love our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen.