

“The Fairy Tale Gospel?”

Deuteronomy 15:1-10

Sermon by Jan Edmiston – September 10, 2006

Fairlington Presbyterian Church

Prayer for Illumination:

Holy God, you know what we most need in this hour. Silence every voice but your own as your Word comes alive in the souls of each one present. We pray in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

This is an upbeat, hopeful message we’ve just heard from the ancient Book of Deuteronomy:

- All debts are to be cleared every 7 years - at least between neighbors,
- No one will be “in need” – not even neighboring nations – because the children of Israel will be so blessed that they will have plenty to lend to anyone in need - even whole nations,
- The children of Israel will rule the world!

The LORD reminds them to share liberally with neighbors and to avoid “mean thoughts” because if they do, the LORD will bless them.

And then, they’ll live happily ever after. (Actually that last part is not in there, but it sure sounds like a “happily ever after” kind of story, doesn’t it?)

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The children of Israel had escaped slavery in Egypt and were on their way to The Promised Land, led by Moses – a trip that should have taken less than a week but actually took 40 years. So these Israelites had plenty of time along the way to incur debts, to loan out money themselves, and even to have long-term relationships with other countries. Even though they themselves had been slaves in Egypt, they bought their own slaves as they wandered to the freedom of The Promised Land.¹

But here’s the problem. As we can probably guess, there was never a time when they were not hardhearted or tight-fisted toward their neighbors. And there is no evidence in ancient history that the Israelites – or any nation – forgave all debts every seven years.²

How great would this be: every seven years your mortgage is erased, your credit card bills are erased, your car loan is erased. But also, all international loans, all federal debts – cancelled. Everybody starts all over again every seven years.

¹ See Deuteronomy 15:12ff, not to mention – from The Ten Commandments – Exodus 20:10.

² In Leviticus 25:10-17 this is carried further calling for a “jubilee year” every 49 years to cancel all debts, but again, there is no record that this ever happened.

We'd be tempted – wouldn't we? – to take out a loan for a BMW or a beach house in Year Six, knowing that we'd only have to pay on them for a year.

But alas, this remission of debts was never a reality. If we keep reading in this chapter in Deuteronomy, there are also laws about freeing slaves after six years, but records show that most slaveholders liked having slaves and they kept them enslaved. I imagine people hearing Moses speak these words and thinking, "This sounds very nice, but let's get real."

Here's something real:

There will never cease to be some in need on the earth.

This is what God said, and we can surely agree with God on this. The harder part follows:

Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.

We come up with lots of reasons not to do this:

- we have our own expenses (frankly, our own debts to pay off)
- people are poor because they don't work as hard as I do
- maybe they aren't even really all that poor.

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We come to believe that these stories are just that: stories, perhaps with morals and lessons, but something made up with rules that we can follow – or not.

I remember in my first semester of Old Testament Studies in seminary, the professor – a man named Bill Holliday who was a world-renowned Jeremiah scholar – lugged in a large metal suitcase on the very first day of class. Like an ancient prophet himself, he moved slowly and deliberately, not saying a word as we watched him open the metal suitcase and slowly, gingerly take out what looked like small boxes made of clay.

He unwrapped them from individual pieces of tissue paper. And he lined them up on his desk – one by one. And finally he spoke:

"This is the kind of lamp that Abraham would have used."

"And this is the kind of lamp that Moses would have used."

"And this is the kind of lamp that Jeremiah would have used."

"And this – this is the kind of lamp that Jesus would have used."

And suddenly I got it. We were going to study real people who had lived long, long ago. They had used lamps. They had poured oil into them and held them in the night to see their way in the tents and caves and houses where they'd lived. We were going to be talking about real people.

And real people don't live in fairy tales.

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The world that God made for us and the plan God has for us to live together in that world almost sounds like a fairy tale, though. People sharing lavishly. People helping out their neighbor. People treating each other fairly.

If you live a good life, only good things will happen to you.

If you obey God, you'll never have a problem.

But this isn't real life. We who call ourselves "God's people" do not live this way.

I once heard a non-Christian friend say:

I like Jesus. I admire and respect Jesus. I just can't stand his followers. They don't do anything Jesus talked about.

If there was a reality show about Christians and Church, it would be just as scandalous as a reality show about any secular group of people. And this is nothing new.

After the apostle Paul established the church in Corinth in Greece, it took very little time for the church members there to wander from God's great plan:

- The Christians fought over "who was the best spiritual leader: some said Paul, some Peter, some Apollos, and the really spiritual people said, "I only follow Jesus!"³
- One of the members was having an affair with his step-mother.⁴
- Church members were suing each other in courts of law because they couldn't play nice.⁵
- Members argued over what food and drink were acceptable.⁶
- People were even getting drunk at the communion table.⁷

Did they think that God wasn't serious when he sent Jesus to show us how to live? Because this was not how Jesus lived or taught his followers how to live.

³ 1 Corinthians 1:11-12

⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:1

⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:1

⁶ 1 Corinthians 8:4-8

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:20-21.

And this is not a fairy tale. This is a reality that God has planned whether we cooperate or not.

But if we are serious about living a different kind of life, if we really hope to be Christians – followers of Jesus – than this is the kind of life we will work towards. And we will be judged one day on how we did along the way.

Like the children of Israel, we tend to wander. But God has promised a different reality. It's not a fairy tale; it is the way of God through Christ. And it will be delicious and joyful and great.