

# The Messenger of the Covenant

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First Lutheran Church, Kirkland, Illinois — Advent II, December 8, 2024

**Malachi 3:1-7; Psalm 66:1-12; Philippians 1:2-11; Luke 3:1-14**

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To begin with, I'm going to get into some pretty heady scholarly stuff for a few moments, so fasten your seat belts.

In 1931 a little-known Slovenian scholar named Viktor Korošec published a book in German entitled *Hethitische Staatsverträge: Ein Beitrag zu ihrer juristischen Wertung*. Working from archaeological discoveries earlier in the century, Korošec discussed the structure of treaties that ancient Hittite kings in Asia Minor made with other lesser rulers within their empire. In a brief monograph published in Pittsburgh in 1954, George E. Mendenhall laid out the implications of this treaty structure for our understanding of the Bible; the title was *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East*.

What is this treaty structure? It begins when the ruler, called the “Great King,” recites to his treaty partner what he has done for him to establish and affirm him in his place within the empire. The king then lays down the rules the partner needs to keep to maintain the treaty. Then the king proclaims what scholars call the “sanctions,” the benefits the partner will enjoy *if* he stays faithful to the Great King, along with the bad things that will happen to him *if* he doesn't. Then the Great King invokes his gods to uphold the treaty, and finally he and his partner share a meal to ratify the agreement.

Okay, I think you can take a breath now. What emerged from this esoteric study first known only to a few biblical scholars was the realization that the Bible, having begun to take shape during the same historical period as the ancient Hittite empire, is also like a treaty between partners. In Scripture this treaty is known as the *covenant*, an agreement between the Lord and his people where each has an obligation to the other. The terms of this agreement can be stated very simply, and are so stated several times in both the Old and New Testaments: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). In other words, God will do what is appropriate for a God to do for his worshipers, and his worshipers will do what is appropriate for them to do for their God, and in this way the treaty is maintained.

In fact, some parts of the Bible have a sequence that's comparable to the structure of the Hittite treaties, in which the Great King tells his partner what he has done for him, lays down the requirements of the treaty, and pronounces the sanctions of reward and punishment. The clearest example is the Book of Deuteronomy, where the Lord reminds Israel, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Then he gives the requirements to stay in the agreement: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deuteronomy 5:6-7) with all the subsequent commandments. Then he proceeds to the sanctions of blessing and curse in chapter 28. *If* you keep the agreement, “the Lord will make you abound in prosperity . . . And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail” (vv. 11, 13). But *if* you are unfaithful, “all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you” (v. 15).

Finally, the Lord invokes the witnesses to the agreement but, since he is the one God he can't invoke other gods. Instead, he summons his creation: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse” (31:19). As to the special meal that ratifies the covenant, that's not in Deuteronomy but we find it in Exodus when Israel first receives the commandments, where the elders of Israel go up the mountain with Moses and there “they beheld God, and ate and drank” (Exodus 24:11).

So the Bible is a covenant, God's treaty with us, and certain parts of Scripture have a structure similar to what Korošec and Mendenhall found in those treaties of the ancient Hittite kings. Therefore, when we hear what the prophet Malachi has to say in our first lesson about the coming of the Lord's special “messenger,” our ears should prick up. “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the *messenger of the covenant* in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts”

(Malachi 3:1). He is coming “like a refiner’s fire” to purify the people of God and prepare them for the service God expects from them.

Someone is coming, Malachi says, who will administer God’s covenant and re-establish God’s treaty with his people. Someone is coming who will make it possible for people to enter into agreement with the Great King, to become members of his kingdom and his family, and by faith — and by *faithfulness* — receive the salvation he has for us. Someone is coming who will tell his followers, during a special meal in an upper room — just as Moses and the elders of Israel went up the mountain — “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Jesus renews the covenant. In fact, *Jesus is the covenant*, because through membership in him we come into agreement with the Great King, and enjoy the benefits of being his treaty partner in the kingdom.

Korošek, and Mendenhall after him, explained that in the Hittite treaties the Great King begins by reminding his treaty partner of what he has done for him. For Israel, the great thing the Lord had done for them — and which they recounted again and again — was the Exodus, their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Our Psalm for today, Psalm 66, is one of many places in the Bible where this event is celebrated. “Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot” (Psalm 66:5-6). The Exodus is the great liberating event of Scripture, when the Lord delivers his people from their oppressors and slave masters.

For us, as Christian believers, Jesus by his death and resurrection provides our Exodus into freedom. At his transfiguration, Luke says, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus “and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). The Greek word translated “departure” here is *exodus*, and it refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Through membership in Jesus we experience our Exodus from a dysfunctional, sin-filled life into the freedom of a new life of victory and power over sin. Through membership in Jesus we are released from the clutches of a culture that’s “out of whack,” corrupted by twisted ideas and values. As Paul writes, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). Our God has raised us up and set us free, in order to establish his treaty with us with its promise of new life.

But if God has made this agreement with us, don’t we have certain obligations to keep our end of the bargain? I know that Martin Luther didn’t like the idea of keeping the law in order to earn God’s favor, and that his teaching was all about God’s grace freely given. But Luther, as a husband and father, must have understood that any relationship has two sides, and we don’t stay in the relationship if we just ignore the needs and desires of the other partner.

So I am sure that Luther, as a Bible scholar, recognized how many times the word “if” occurs in the New Testament. For example, Paul writes to the Romans, “If you live according to the flesh you will die, but *if* by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). God’s grace is freely given, but we can resist it with our prideful, “independent” attitude and block its effect in our lives. John writes, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 3:19). But that love of God — I have to say — is not the “unconditional love” some people talk about. Our obligation in the covenant is to *remain open to the Spirit of God* as he leads us to live according to the pattern of conduct God lays out for us in his Word. That’s how we keep our end of the bargain. According to Jesus there is one unforgivable sin: “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:32). If by our attitude and actions we block the work of the Spirit in us, how can we receive God’s forgiveness and enjoy the new life he has for us?

So we keep our treaty obligation in order to enjoy the blessings that come from being faithful to our Great King. There are things the Lord wants to do for us, and in us, that are for our benefit. The apostle Paul told the Philippians, “It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13). In our third lesson today he writes, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). The Lord wants to make you and me more effective as his witnesses and ambassadors, and that might include making us more healthy, more

prosperous, better connected in our relationships, more understanding of the needs of those around us, more knowledgeable about how to navigate through the maze of life in today's world. These are the blessings of God's covenant with us, and they come when we remain faithful in our allegiance to the Great King.

Where does our fourth lesson, from the Gospel of Luke, tie into all this? It's not about Jesus, that "messenger of the covenant" Malachi spoke about who would restore the people of God to their rightful place in God's plan for them. Instead, it's about John the Baptist, that messenger who prepared the way for Jesus with his preaching about repentance for the forgiveness of sin. But in a sense John is also a "messenger of the covenant," for he is calling the people of Judea back into the family of God, back into faithfulness to the treaty of the Great King. Indeed, as followers of Jesus perhaps we are all "messengers of the covenant" with the mission to reach out to others and invite them into agreement with their Creator, so they can enjoy the benefits that flow from the love and faithfulness of the living God.

And one final note. A king does not make a treaty with peons. A king makes a treaty with *other kings*. If the Lord wants to make an agreement with us, that shows that he regards us as responsible partners in the covenant, people made in his own image with similar abilities of creativity and benevolence, and corresponding dominion over the realm he has entrusted to us. Entering into covenant with the Lord God, through his Son Jesus, is a high privilege and an honor for every believer.

In our effort to understand and practice the Christian faith we rely on people serving in many different capacities. Gifted pastors preach the word with power and effectiveness. Wise counselors help us to understand ourselves and our relationships with others. Perceptive leaders navigate the church through troubled waters and help it to do what God has called it to do. And then . . . there are a few obscure souls who dig up artifacts from archaeological sites, who toil over old manuscripts in dusty libraries, who decode ancient texts and publish their results in a language few of us in America can actually read. But even these dry academics may come up with something that makes a big difference in how we understand our relationship to the Lord, what our responsibilities are in that relationship, and how rich are the benefits our gracious and loving God — our Great King — so much desires to bestow upon us.

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