The Making of the Foundations

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: 2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16; Romans 16.25-end; Luke 1.26-38

The traditional Nine Lessons and Carols service has become a centrepiece of the way a church like St Martin’s celebrates Christmas. The setting is enchanting, and when you have a choir like ours the experience is a real treat. There’s only one problem with the traditional service – it tells a rather narrow story of what Christmas is about. The Old Testament is reduced to two things – an account of what went wrong that it took Christ to solve, and a set of prophecies for the Messiah’s coming.

Today I want to offer what I believe is a richer notion of what’s going on in the Old Testament. I want to suggest we can more fully understand the meaning of Christmas when we get a sense of what the Old Testament is wrestling with and what that wrestling decides and what it leaves unresolved. I want to suggest the Old Testament has four foundations and that we more fully discover who Christ is when we locate him within these four foundations.

The first foundation is God’s promise to Noah. When the flood is all dried up and the animals have left the ark two-by-two and the rainbow appears, God says the resonant words, ‘Never again.’ You may think there’s nothing special in those words – they sound like the kind of thing any couple says after a domestic argument or any council of nations declares after a world war. Never again. But what these words mean in the mouth of God is that however bad the world gets, destroying it is off the table. God will change, transform, redeem, perfect the world, but God can’t destroy it. Rather than begin the carol service with Adam and Eve, maybe we should start here. Christ’s coming becomes inevitable once God has ruled out the nuclear option. This then becomes the first wrestling question of the Bible: how is God going to redeem the world? If God can’t abolish us, God has to try every other trick in the book – including coming in human form.

The second foundation is God’s promise to Abraham. God decides to raise a protégé man, and a protégé nation, which comes to be known as Israel. This is probably the most controversial part of the Bible today, because of the way some have taken God’s promise to give to Abraham a land for his descendants, and have identified that promise as a title deed to the land of the State of Israel today. But perhaps more significant is the way the promise ends: ‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ The land and even the multitude of descendants isn’t the point. The purpose of the promise is for God’s blessing to be shed upon the families of the earth. This then becomes the second wrestling question of the Bible: how is God going to bless all the peoples of the earth? God may redeem the world, but how is the world going to receive this redemption – how is everyone going to learn of it and experience it and live in the joy of it?

The third foundation is God’s covenant with Moses. The circumstances of Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt are dramatic and exciting – with the plagues, the death of the first-born, the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea. But what it’s all building up to is the moment on Mount Sinai where Moses receives the Law. The covenant puts in place a relationship that goes beyond the creation of Adam and Eve or the calling of Abraham. This is what humanity was created for – to be God’s companions, as enshrined in a covenant. The crucial word in the covenant with Moses is the tiny word ‘if.’ God will assure the well-being of Israel if Israel remains faithful to God. It’s a conditional promise. This then becomes the third wrestling question of the Bible: will Israel remain
faithful to God, and, if not, how unfaithful does Israel have to be to break the covenant and lose God’s blessing? Is God’s love always conditional?

Today’s Old Testament reading provides the fourth foundation. Even though Israel is settled in the Promised Land, God is still wild and free. Israel has the ark of the covenant, the law which is carried around as needed. But there’s no permanent home for God with Israel. 2 Samuel 7 changes all that. God promises to build a house after David. You’ve got to catch the two senses of the word ‘house.’ It means a temple, a place where Israel will always know it can be reconciled with God and experience God’s holiness. But ‘house’ also means lineage, family tree, dynasty. The crucial thing that happens in 2 Samuel 7 is that God takes away the ‘if.’ God’s love for Israel becomes unconditional. It’s permanent, whatever happens. This is the high water mark of the Old Testament. It’s as good as it gets. And it creates the fourth wrestling question of the Bible: how will this amazing grace play out? Will God regret being so yoked to Israel forever?

I’ve called these wonderings ‘wrestling questions’ for a reason. The name Israel means the one who struggles with God. Israel from first to last is a wrestling question. The reason we read the Old Testament is not as a source of children’s stories or prophecies about Jesus but because it’s a 600,000 word meditation on what it means to wrestle with God. Before we look at the answers to these wrestling questions, let’s look at their significance.

If you put the Moses question and the David question together, you get the great wrestling at the heart of all our lives – will the things that matter, our relationships, our values, our very existence – last forever, or will they break, fail, falter, and perish like the withering grass and the fading flower? Will they break because of sin or simply erode because of the passing of time? Or does God name a power, an elixir, a love that never fades, never withers, restores every break and withstands all erosion? To believe in God is to say yes to that fundamental question: to believe in Jesus is to recognise there are no lengths to which God won’t go to heal, redeem, and re-establish our existence and our eternal divine companionship.

If you add in the Noah question, you make the wrestling more intense. When a relationship breaks up, someone will eventually say, ‘There’s plenty more fish in the sea.’ When you lose your job, someone will sooner or later say, ‘You could try doing something else.’ But when you add Noah to Moses and David what you get is the discovery that there isn’t anything else, anyone else: all God’s eggs are in the world and Israel’s basket, and God’s whole being is going to be absorbed in making this relationship come right. Any of us can look at our lives and say, ‘I’m still keeping my options open.’ There comes a time when we can’t say that any more. We call that time the moment of truth. God says ‘Never again.’ Tossing creation away and starting again isn’t any longer an option. God has no choice but to make this work.

And that leaves us with the Abraham question – what is this whole story for? In any relationship if you just exist for each other sooner or later you find there’s not enough to go on. You need a cause beyond either of you. The Abraham story tells us what that greater cause is – to bring a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. God has given us life, but for many people that life is a burden and a prison and a curse, some or all of the time. God wants that life to be a blessing. That’s what all these foundations are finally for – that we experience life as a blessing in relationship with God, one another and the whole creation, now and forever.

So those are the foundational questions. Will God decide to destroy creation? No. What is creation for? To be a blessing and to pass on a blessing. What is that blessing? Relationship with God, one another and the whole creation. Is that relationship secure, or can it be lost? It’s secure, but keeping it and restoring it will cost God not less than everything. Who says the Old Testament is arcane and irrelevant? Are there any more significant questions than these? Don’t our nature and destiny depend on these questions and their answers?
It turns out God’s answer to every one of these foundational questions is Jesus. The Noah question is, will God destroy the earth? No, but the cost of the earth’s estrangement from God is so great that it destroys Jesus. That’s the cross. The Abraham question is, what’s creation for? It’s for blessing. Jesus is the embodiment of that blessing, the constant offer of forgiveness, the perpetual promise of eternal life, the most wonderful gifts imaginable. The Moses question is, where is that blessing found? The answer is, in covenant, in relationship with God and one another. Jesus is the new covenant – he is the perfect relationship between God and humankind. The David question is, how can that covenant be forever? Clearly the Temple turned out not to be forever and the dynasty of David didn’t last more than a few hundred years, either.

But this is why 2 Samuel 7 is such a crucial passage, not just for the Old Testament, but also for the New. Why do Jesus’ followers call him Son of David? Because of this passage. Jesus represents the restoration of God’s eternal covenant with Israel. Why do the gospels return again and again to the Temple? Because the Temple had been the physical manifestation of God’s eternal covenant with Israel, and now that physical manifestation is Jesus. Why do half of Jesus’ controversies with the authorities concern the Law? Because the Law is identical with the same eternal covenant and Jesus is that covenant so Jesus is the Law. Why is Jesus’ promise of eternal life so significant? Because in the absence of the king and the temple all Israel in Jesus’ day could claim besides the Law was the land, and Jesus is saying that his Spirit is Lord over the whole earth, and the Promised Land that matters is everlasting life with God.

Maybe you’re wrestling with questions of existence and purpose. Maybe you look around and wonder if everyone else has the kinds of wrestlings that you live with, day by day. If so, you’re in good company in the Old Testament and in a church like this. And you’re asking them at the right time of year, because Christmas is all about those questions. But I’ve got good news for you. Jesus is the answer to every one of the Old Testament’s questions about God and every one of our wonderings about existence. That’s why we read the Bible. That’s why we have carol services. That’s why we celebrate Christmas.