

9-7-86. Creation. One of the more distressing things about human nature is our love of a heated debate; sometimes even to the point of violence, about matters on which there is no hard & fast evidence either way. I am by profession an historian, and I took up this trade a long while ago, in part at least because of the pleasure I get in watching and hearing conflicts out of the past, quarrels that once divided friends and tribes and nations, matters that were of the utmost weight and significance, but which with the passage of time became so unintelligible that only antiquarians ~~today~~ can understand and appreciate them. I wonder if anyone today would do battle over the procession of the holy spirit. I am certain that none of my students understands or cares about the indulgence controversy, or lay investiture, or nominalism and realism. It takes real devotion to work oneself into a lather of indignation over the free and unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of 16:1; and wouldn't you guess that most people today are as mystified as were our British cousins in 1765 over the fine distinction between internal and external taxation? Those, and a 1000 other long-dead debates, are meat and drink to the historian, who makes his hobby all those ponderous and divisive trivialities that brought us to this moment. So many are they, that once struck sparks and ignited fires, but which lost importance, and even meaning, that there is a book entitled *The Enduring Questions*. They are not numerous, and in that is a sad footnote to human history. It means that nearly all of the subjects that we are losing our tempers over today will be forgotten very soon. And isn't that sad? But cheer up, my brethren, and sisters, for today we have one of those enduring subjects to discuss and think about, Text Gen 1,2. Today we begin a new month and a new yr and a new lesson series. This one is about the beginning of the covenant people, and it will keep us occupied for three months, 13 lessons, until the end of November. It asks us to think about, and remember, what is one of the major themes of the Bibl faith. It is that the God of the Hebrews is unlike any other god in every way that you and I can imagine. The starting point of that difference is in the covenant between God and people. The recurring phrase I will be your God, and you will be my people, sets forth the foundation of a contract, an agreement, that binds both God and mankind. God holds us all to allegiance and obedience, but God is also bound by his own definition of righteousness, and acts in accordance with his own moral commandments to mankind. With such a God there can be confidence and comfort, for the terror of the unknown is overcome in certainty. In a world under the authority of the covenant God there can be order in human affairs as there is in the behavior and movement of the heavenly bodies. There can also be justice because God has provided law for his people, to do to others as well as to obey in ourselves. Immorality and selfishness and oppression shall be punished, with guilt and an uneasy mind, and then with God's wrath and destruction. Righteousness and obedience and humility before the omnipotence of the Almighty provide peace in mind and soul, spiritual prosperity, and happy lives. In the light of the covenant it is the incredible fact that most of us deny the present reality of God; we set and live by our own moral rules, we exalt the material and the sensual over mind and soul, and then suffer the consequences. The rabbis teach it, prophets proclaim it, preachers hold it up to us, but it was the gifted and sensitive Albert Einstein who said it best: in this life there are no rewards and no punishments; there are only consequences. For some of us the consequences are rewards, and for others they are punishments. In a world and a humanity under the judgment of a covenant God we may keep or we may break the laws, but it is not given to us to repeal them, or to amend them. That is elementary and basic to the faith of Israel, which we have inherited from those ancients who also gave us the Messianic vision. This fall, then, let us go back to the beginnings, back to the old landmarks, back to the roots of our faith. We begin at the very beginning, to see the covenant in the creation. Gen 1: 1, 26--2:1-3. This is the first of three creation stories in the Bible. The others are in Gen 2, which is the male chauvinist version of human beginnings, and in Ps 104, a hymn to be sung to God the Creator of All. This one, I am told, is not so old as in Gen 2, and is much simpler in form. We are assigned only a portion of it, and I hope we shall all consider it an assignment to read it all. Let us note some of its testimony, and then comment upon its meaning. The story begins with the words, in the beginning. When was that? We do not know, and the earth scientists, and the astrophysicists, who have been arguing about it for centuries, are not sure either. In 1654 bishop Ussher of Ireland counted lifespans of the patriarchs listed in those genealogies in the Bible, I call them the begot and the begotten, and fixed the date of the creation at 9 a.m. on an October morning in 4004 b.c.; if I count it right the earth and stars and sun and moon will be 5990 yrs old next month, by that reckoning. But even if we take literally the lists of begets, there is no way of reading into the 6 days of creation a strict 24-hour turn of earth as we measure time. From the ages of rocks and other such evidence, the best estimate is, and estimate is the right word even for the earth scientists, the creation took place $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 6 billion years ago, when a small bit of proto-matter exploded with a big bang, in incredible heat, so extremely hot in fact that nearly 4 minutes passed before there could be atoms. If we are to believe the astronomers who study the origins, at the moment of explosion the universe was in perfect symmetry, which it has not again known. From that bang neutrinos were set in motion, matter came

into being, the emptiness of interstellar space was created--astounding thought, that--where there was nothing, there was vacuum and the silence of infinite space that so terrified Pascal. In obedience to mathematically precise laws, all of the universe which we can observe came into being. If we have the ability and the interest, you and I could devote our lives to the study of the beginning of time, and the excitement of the first three minutes of it. The same story, or a similar story, is recounted here. There was a void, without form, which we call chaos, into which came order. One of the oldest and most dependable of the quips you may hear in a history lecture is of someone--the name changes with the subject--who was so conservative that had he been present at the creation he would have preferred chaos to change. The spirit of God moved upon that void, and in the darkness there was light, and in the insensate there was life, and growth, and movement. Mankind came into being, male and female, no distinction of rank or precedence, and to them God gave dominance over every living thing, plants, fish, birds, animals. On the 6th day God finished, and on the 7th he rested. That is the beautiful story we have of creation, and we could spend long months in its study and contemplation. But there are most significant aspects of this story that we need to note, and to think about. One of them is the continuing futility of the quarrel between the literalists and the scientists about the creation. My dearly beloved, there should be no disagreement between faith and reason. This beautiful poem is told to establish the Who of creation; the astronomers and biologists and geologists and atomic physicists must work to explain the How of it. This account tells many of us all we want to know about this world and what we can see of our galaxy. In the beginning God created it. That means that the universe did not come into existence by accident, or without plan and purpose. It means that before time began, God existed. There are no proofs here of God, no argument about it. It is confidently assumed that reality has a divine foundation and that the visible has meaning. No fatalism is here, no doubt of the author. Just a few lines later and the reader comes to the tragedy of rebellion and disobedience. But that is not the end of the story, no more than the physical world is the beginning. Life would be a jigsaw puzzle with none of the parts cut to fit together if it were a cosmic accident, or a mistake. That would be the miracle, and it would take gallons of faith to swallow. But note clearly that this account says nothing about How. The scientist is bound by his credo to seek explanations for the visible reality he sees around him, in terms of that reality itself. He is prohibited from going beyond the tangible or accepting what cannot be empirically demonstrated. That means that he cannot go beyond that primeval lump of matter that exploded into what you see on a clear night. He cannot explain where the chaos came from, for that is not his territory. Nothing in this account makes impossible the belief that God did it, and that he did it by natural law which can be comprehended by man, who is part of the creation he studies. May it be this generation which brings to an end a destructive warfare between science and religion that hobbles our worship of God with all our minds, and which restricts our understanding of the world we live in. Another thing: if God made it, it's good. Anything good becomes evil when it is misused, but is a blessing when used in the purpose of God. This is my father's world; in the beginning God created it. I cannot stand apart from it, or refuse to learn of it, or withdraw from it. It is flawed by man's rebellion, yes. But the Kingdom of God is God's creation healed of its faults. This is the meaning of incarnation, and is the covenant in the creation. Since God is the creator, then nothing in his creation can prevent his purposes. It is as foolish, and as futile, to resist the righteousness and the law of God and expect to prosper, as it would be to sweep back the tides, or to stop that glacier that is slowly crushing the forests of Alaska. The natural world is his because he made it. We are his because he made us too. We are free to choose our way of life, and to take the consequences of our choice. We can be sure that all the forces of the universe work for us when we try in all humility to be what we were made to be. The humblest child, and the wisest philosopher, can each say nothing that is so profound as this: God made me, and God made the world I live in, so that as long as I am faithful and penitent I need have no fear, for all things work together for good to those who love God and are called to his purposes... And another thing: the Bible is not a book of science, for its writers had a more important question to put than How creation occurred. If we know the Who then life makes sense, it adds up, there is purpose and meaning and beginning and end. And then there is another question, also more important to our spirit than the How: and that is Why? Not the process but the purpose. It seems likely that what began in tremendous heat will end in absolute cold, entropy, not a moving molecule left. Without the Who it is senseless, purposeless, a relatively brief life of light and heat, ^{then} endless eons of dark and cold beyond belief. But the creation story we find here has a mind and a direction and a purpose. We may in our childish temper-tantrum refuse the God who made us, we may abuse our bodies with opiates and despoil this beautiful planet. But that does not cancel out the Biblical faith of the creator who is love and who cares. No one who knows of the world can doubt the mind that made it. Look at the galaxy in Orion thru the most powerful telescope, and look at the poliomyelitis virus thru the electron microscope. From the largest to the smallest there is a resemblance so breath-taking that you know there is a family relationship. Everything in creation sings of the mind and the purpose of God.

9-14-86. Rainbow. The oldest epic literature which has been preserved for us is the story of Gilgamesh, king among the Sumerians. The epic was first written 3000 yrs ago, and was in the oral tradition much before that. Gilgamesh is the first human hero of a tale told to teach and to entertain. His story is also the first evidence of the literary style we call tragedy. The poem of mourning for the friend of Gilgamesh, who died, is as moving an experience as is the elegy of John Milton or Shelley's lament upon the death of Keats. I mention all this because one of the chapters of the Gilgamesh epic tells of the flood that washed away all things, except those on board the boat of the Sumerian Noah, whose name was Ziusudra, or Utnapishtim. In that version the gods decided to destroy the creation because people made too much noise. I quote: in those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil commanded: The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel. So they sent the flood. Waters covered the face of the earth. In his boat Utnapishtim looked out upon that sea: I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay...I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. In the Gilgamesh story there are basic differences with the Bibl account. The god is angered that anyone escaped drowning in the Sumerian version, and there is no covenant of promise written in the skies. So I prefer the Bibl version. Let us re-read it, and think about its meaning. Text Gen 9. Today we have the 2d in a qr unit on the beginning of the covenant people. Covenant may be a word, and an idea, that we know little about, for we do not often use the word. It is a legal term, for contract, or agreemt between two parties, in which each binds himself to do what it has agreed to do. That there should be a contract between God and man is one of the most important doctrines of Bibl relig. In effect God offers us a deal; if we keep our allegiances pure and our faith unshaken, and if we obey the rules, then God will be our God and we shall be his people. That relatshp, which we Xns have inherited from our Jewish parents, is the foundat-shone of our faith. It tells us that God our creator is a covenant-maker; he is not mad, or senseless. He will not destroy us for the trivial reason that we make so much noise that he cannot sleep. Our God in fact does not sleep, nor is he distant from us. He makes promises, and then he keeps them. It is the Bibl faith that God speaks covenant words to a covenant people, and enters into a covenant relatshp in an act of covenant, and that is a fact of surpassing significance. It means that God takes the initiative to reach from eternity into time to touch us with his presence, and that God wants nothing but good things for us. But there is a condition, and that is the other side of the contract. The covenant relatshp puts both God and mankind under obligats and responsibls, and that means that the universe is not a thing of blind force. In such a world there can be order and predictability and mathematical precision to the physical realm in which we live. Last wk we looked briefly at the covenant in the creation; today we come to the covenant in the skies. It is a promise made to all living things in the creation. The background to it is the story of the flood that you may read about in Gen 6-8. The Bibl account emphasizes 3 imp facts: 1) early in human existence man rebelled vs. God and sought sensual and selfish pleasures; 2) the sin of mankind aroused the wrath of God--for every act there is a consequence, man's wrongdoing brings God's retribution; 3) during the time of flood God showed his mercy by making a plan to save every kind of living thing in the ark. That is a parable that is of great importance to the theologians. The flood is the first example of the mainstream of Bibl relig--sin, judgment, deliverance; it is the earliest example of the grace of God going beyond what people deserved to protect and redeem human life. It also shows the arbitrary choice of God working among us; Noah and his family were saved by grace. Read the story to see who shut the door of the ark so that none but the chosen were saved. After the flood God repented of his wrath, and made some fundamental decisions. Gen 9: 1-15. This is the giving of the first covenant between God & mankind, and also it is the first amendmt of the laws for human living. In the 1st Chap of Gen, v. 29, God made man a vegetarian; he is to eat of the green plants, and of the seeds and of the fruit that has seeds in it. But now, Gen 9, man is permitted to eat meat. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; as before God gave man the green plants, now he gives us everything. As you know, in the Mosaic code that came much later than this, there were restrictions upon that liberty. Here they could not eat meat with blood in it, and they were to hold human life in deep respect. Life is the most precious thing on this planet; it is the gift of God, and it is therefore God's to take when he will. But the heart of this passage is the covenant that we find in it. Behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your descendants, and with every living creature. That is as broad a contract as you will ever see. This is the first covenant, and so it deserves our close attention. The first mention of covenant is in 6:18; which like this one is a promise of future conduct. Too, like this one, it is unconditional. In that//the Noah covenant is different from the later, or Mosaic, contract. God made a promise, and no human action was required to fulfill it. Nor did God ask Noah if we wanted to enter into an agreemt, or if he would abide by the rules if one were offered. He simply said, this is the way it is going to be. I your God will voluntarily limit my pwr.

Never again would there be a flood like the one Noah had survived; never again a deluge that would destroy all flesh. Now, think what that meant to Noah. Here was the all-powerful God, who could send the storm and cover the earth w/water, who could control the earthquake and the volcano and the lightning bolt, promising never again to permit a flood to kill mankind. It was the most reassuring word Noah could have heard just then. He had lived through a terrifying experience, one he would never forget. The waters had just run off, the ground newly dry, and now there were clouds forming above them. Could it be that the peril was not over? Primitive man feared what he could not understand, just as do we. Demonic forces plotted against him; even the God who made him had destroyed an entire civilization. The word hope was not in their vocabulary; all about them was a hostile world. Then came the promise of God. At the darkest moment came assurance that this would never happen again, that they would have no cause to fear their world. God made it, and it was good. Life and death would go on, of course; all the covenants had to do w/life & death. But never again would the God of life destroy all living things. The proof would glow in the skies after a rain. The rainbow is the visible covenant, and to understand the meaning of the symbolism, we need to know that the Hebr word used here for bow, I set my bow in the cloud, is always used for the weapon, the bow that hurls the arrow. It goes back to the idea that the lightning was God's arrows, shot from his bow, and then put aside when he is not longer angry. What makes this image so powerful is that here, and only here in all the Bible, the word does not mean a weapon with which to attack mankind; it becomes a arc of vivid colors set in the clouds, the rainbow, a symbol not of warfare between God and man, a battle man cannot ever expect to win. The spear is broken, the hatchet is buried, the sword is made into plowshares. The symbol of war becomes the promise of peace, and that which brought death is the guarantee of life. Now, there are some things about this story that we need to note, and to think about. First, note that the promise of peace was not made to human beings only. It was also made to all the other creatures of earth, all which had survived the flood, the cattle, the beasts, and the birds. It was, in short, the solemn promise of God to his creation and not just to mankind. It was also not limited to those who heard it, to Noah and to his sons and their wives. It was made to all their descendants for all time to come, and wherever they might be. That means us. That first covenant promise of God was not made to a selected few, not to an elect, not to any chosen people. It was made to all people in every land and every age. It was meant for all of us who live as prisoners of fear; it said, fear not, for the world is not hostile, it is a good place for you; enjoy it, and do not fear it. It was meant for the people who have lost hope, who sometimes cry out, What's the use? we are all doomed anyway. Why were we born? It was a promise to all who live amid the black shadows of guilt, which some would call the starting point of relig; some of us think that everything that goes wrong must be the punishment for some shortcomings. It is a promise to all who fear what tomorrow might bring. And it is a promise to all who try to shut their ears to the promise of a caring God who wishes them well. The rainbow really marked the end of the primitive age of human life, and the beginning of a new era in which the fear of nature would give way before a growing understanding of it. It was not a return to the ideal conditions of the garden, but it was God's promise of his presence in a world in which there is failure and pain and death. The second thing we must note is that it is not a promise that there will be no more floods on earth. We know better than that; even in adrought year for us there have been floods for others. People are drowned in deep waters, and so are the cattle and the beasts. Nor is it a promise that man in his rebellion will never himself destroy all living things on the planet. Our freedom includes the freedom to blow up with nuclear blasts or pollute with radioactive materials what is not ours. But the rainbow is the beginning of hope after despair and death. God is judge but he is sustainer of life. More than that, he puts limits upon his powers, for God also recognized that unlimited authority was not the solution to the problem of rebellion and sin. Men might go on sinning, men might live in ignorance and folly, but the God of hope and mercy, the God of infinite patience, will never again use a flood to wipe them out. He would instead use other ways of breaking through to confront them with his love and his law. Another thing we must note is that the rainbow was put into the clouds not so much to assure mankind of God's love, but to remind God of his promise. V.16 we should read and memorize and quote to ourselves: when the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it, and remember. Do you really think that God needs reminders, or could forget? No, that is what the scholars call anthropomorphism, making God in the shape of man. But what a picture it gives us! It is of a God who loves so much, who cares so much, that he wants to wipe out all the fear we live with, by hanging a neon sign in the heavens when the sunshine follows the rain, so that men will know that has not forgotten, can never forget, his promise. And finally, even if we can explain the rainbow in prosaic natural terms, of light passing through mist, and making the spectrum of colors, that does not alter its beauty, or its meaning. God made sunlight with colors in it, and he made the mist to refract that light--the law of nature to serve a spiritual cause. Look upon the rainbow, and remember the goodness of God. God remembers, and so should we.

9-21-86. Abraham. One of my favorite paintings shows a French peasant couple, wrinkled and worn with age, sitting at table. Between them is a loaf of bread. They sit with folded hands, giving thanks to God for their daily bread, just as we all want to do. It is a picture of simple and unconquerable faith, faith that makes life sweet and meaningful, faith that gets us over the hard places, and through the dark spots, and encourages us to live triumphantly in the midst of sorrow and pain and pointlessness. And yet it is an appalling fact of the world in which we live, that faith in a cause produces not life but terror bombs, not folded hands at a French countrywoman's table but suicide missions, not peace but perpetual warfare. Last week I was reminded of the two faces of faith. I was reading John Updike's new novel Roger's Version, which suits my taste with its subject-matter. It is the story of a divinity-school professor confronted by a young man who wants a grant of money to support him while he proves the existence of God on a computer. The idea of proving God infuriates the older man, who thumbs through his collection of books until he finds the sentence of Karl Barth--there is no way from us to God--not even a negative way, not even a dialectical way or a paradox. The god who stood at the end of some human way would not be God. A little later in the book the two meet again, and the young man defines the devil as doubt, doubt of goodness, doubt of God's gifts to us. That's funny, the professor replies, with all the ayatollahs and fuhrers in the world, I would have thought the opposite. The devil is the absence of doubt. Faith is what pushes people into suicide bombings, and into setting up extermination camps. Doubt may give your dinner a funny taste, but it's faith that goes out and kills. And so it is. And yet we are so made that we cannot live without faith in something larger and more permanent than we; and the object of our faith will determine the nature of our lives. Today we have the story of the founder of the covenant people, who acted upon his vision even when it was clouded & unclear. Text Gen 12,17. Today we have the 3d in a series on the beginning of the covenant people. First was the covenant in the creation, and then last week it was Noah and the covenant in the skies. The Bibl proclamat is that our God is a covenant God, which means that he enters into a contract w/ us, one we break only to our sorrow, but one God himself refuses to break. It means that God is not capricious or arbitrary, that God voluntarily limits his pwr, that he makes promises and then he keeps them. That is the lesson this series of lessons is intended to teach us anew. It is basic to Bibl theology, and out of it comes the acceptance of a universe that is orderly and predictable and subject to rational control, so that we are at home in the world that was made for us. Our faith in a covenant God is not expressed in a creed, or a body of statements, or even a high ethical std. It is instead a relatship w/the person of God; it is an experience, not a system of theol or a set of words to be repeated. In that experience we meet and we trust the God who draws near to us, who makes himself known to us. As we do we are changed and re-directed, and from that encounter we go forth to life, renewed and restored. That experience is available to all of us, if we will by accept it in humble confession, like that French peasant couple at table with their small loaf. We worship not a creed or a building or an empty shell, but the living God who made us, and who made us promises, and wants only the best for us. One of the first of our tribe who heard the call, and acted upon it, was Abraham, our subject for today. He is one of the most remarkable examples of faith the human race has produced. Knowing almost nothing about God he had an experience with God, and from that he moved unquestioningly into the unknown. That is the meaning of the faith that builds a life of joy and peace. Read about Abraham in Gen, from end chap 11 to chap 25. From the aftermath of the flood, the story moves thru a genealogy to the city of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans on the Euphrates River in what is today Iraq. There lived a man named Abram, which means exalted father. He was not fed & inspired by the relig of his people, for the Chaldeans believed that nature was a knowing something that was busily plotting to destroy human life. Relig was thus a basic fear and a sense of doom. In Ur there was a great temple to the worship of the moon-god, where priests recited the magical words that would prevent the victory of nature over people. In that city Abram heard the call of God to his father Terah to rise up & move away from Ur. When Terah died, Abram heard the voice. Gen 12: 1-4. Here was a promise of great importance to a young man who hungered for a meaningful relig experience. Go, Abram, it said, go to a land you do not know about, go in faith and I will show you the way. The covenant is in the words, go, and I will bless you. The word bless occurs 5 times in vv 2 & 3, so it is the critical word. It means to make happy, to comfort, to abide with. God would bless this man if he did as God commanded, bless him by making his name great in a new land, bless him by making him father of a new nation. Note well that the promise was made to an elderly man whose wife Sarah was barren. The record says that Abram went. It does not indicate any hesitation, or planning, or delay. But we should not be surprised if there were doubts. Travel is hard work; imagine what it was like when you must move sheep and cattle, pack tents and carry water and food, for a journey whose direction or terminal you do not know. He must also cut himself off from the security of the settled life, and risk the unknown. He went, as the ltr to the Hebrews in NT put it, not knowing whether he went, and that puts him into a very small company of human greatness. And yet there is a

sense in which every one of us is called to do something similar. Life itself is an adventure, in which each day is a step into the unknown, and we are called to walk it with God, who will show us the way, and bless us with his presence if we leave each day the security of the routine and go down that lonesome road to what we do not know. God calls us to go where we cannot see the road and can imagine only dangers and failures, and as we go all opens up to us. But it takes faith/which is courage/to take that step into the unknown. How many of us would rather stay safely in Ur, not daring/because we do not really believe and therefore cannot trust? The library is filled w/stories of people who felt the urge to do something that looked like madness, something everyone laughed at as impossible, and yet when they dared to take the first step into the unknown then the next one became clear to them. There is no way of knowing how many young people have left home and friends to prepare themselves for a career, not knowing where they would live, or how they would eat, from day to day, week to week, but they did it because they felt a call from God, and when they went they met miracles when they needed a miracle. We see miracle when we act before one occurs. The secret of joy in life is to call God's hand--ok, Lord, you have called me to do the difficult, even the impossible; I will begin, even though I think it is crazy. The call is a covenant, entered into with a covenant God, a God who risks as much in betting on us as we do in betting on him, a God who binds himself to be faithful as he asks us to bind ourselves to be faithful. Faith is a calling of the bluff, to know that it was real and not a bluff, not an empty echo from space, not imaginings of our own. Common sense would tell Abram to stay in his own land, and to think long and hard about that call. How could a man whose wife had no child become father of a great nation, a nation thru which all the families of earth would be blessed? That is crazy. But Abram went, he took the first step. He was the agent of God to heal the whole creation, for never again would he try to destroy it by flood. Note one other fact about this event: all of the initiative is of God. Abram did not go to God; God came to him; he would not make a great nation, God would make it of him; Abram would not make his name great; God would do that. And one other thing: unlike the covenant w/Noah, the rainbow in the clouds, this is the first in which man is expected to do something, to act by faith. It is not enough to believe that I am God, he told Abram; you must arise and go, you must act. Faith is behavior. God builds his kgdm on the actions of the daring. Now let us move forward 24 yrs to find Abram settled in Palestine. Gen 17: 1-8. Some schols think this is a repetition of the covenant in Chap 8, from a different source, for there are similarities, and some repetition. Here is the covenant repeated to Abram, now named Abraham, which means not exalted father, but father of many nations. Abr is to walk w/God, and to be perfect, blameless--a phrase that should be read, be thou wholehearted, or fully dedicated, for it means maturity and completeness, not moral perfection as we would use the words. As Abrah walks w/God, his descendants shall be greatly multiplied. At that promise, Abrh fell on his face, as an act of reverence. And once again God repeated the promise. As the Living Bible reads it, God said, I will give you millions of descendants who will form many nations. It means that not Isr alone, but all kindreds and tribes and nations will look to Abrah as their father. In Abr's response we have the central core of rel. He was humble; he abased himself in the dust before the pwr & majesty of God, which is where we must all begin; he believed that centuries after he had returned to dust there would be kgs reigning who were of his line, & that is patience; and w/this God who speaks, who promises, who makes contracts, he believed that he could be and do the impossible, & that is faith. Humility, patience, faith; that was Abrah, and that is true relig. There was a covenant before there was a cmdmt, before there was a redemption from Egypt, before there were prophets ^{to praise} and psalms to sing. That is the important lesson for us to think about, and meditate upon. There were other promises. It was an everlasting reltshp, that would continue in effect w/Abr's descendants, as far as we can see time stretching, into the dim unknown future. Another everlasting promise was possession of the land of promise, remarkable in that Abrah was at the time a stranger in the land, a sojourner; he was only stopping there, with his herds of animals. But it would belong to Abr's descendants so long as time endured. Note again that it was not something Abrah went to God to ask; it was given not because Abrah had done anything to deserve it, or that it ought to be his. And after all this time it remains the land of promise, and there also continues the struggle for its ownership. Even yet, all Jews consider it the homeland, wherever they may be scattered; and they all regarded Abrah as their father. For Abrah walked w/God, even to the point of offering to sacrifice his son to God, even when he did not understand the why, because God always kept his promises. The descendants of Abr were indeed numbered in multitudes, and kgs were among them. And yes, they did break the covenant, they broke many covenants, but God's purpose in them did not waver, for God was also patient; his love never ceased. In that love for the world he sent an even greater covenant, his only begotten son, who became a blessing to all the nations of the world. And also because Abrah had the faith to move into the unknown when God called him to go. The Dutch writer Corrie ten Boom said, if God sends us on stony paths, he provides strong shoes. In the thanksgiving of the humble there is more faith than anywhere else. As we dare the danger, we know the fulness of God's love.

9-28-86. Sinai. 60 yrs ago the German philosopher ^{Martin Buber} published a remarkable little book with the title, I and Thou. In it he explored the encounters between God and man, and offered an interpretation of their meaning. Earlier thinkers had defined the essential element in man's reltshp w/ God as the dependence, or what may be called the creature-feeling. There is a validity in that idea, for man's rebellion against God is in his effort to be independent, to meet his own needs, to throw off the creature-feeling as somehow infantile or degrading. Buber took that thought and expanded it. I quote from an English translation: That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know that also that God needs you--in the fullness of his eternity, you? How would man exist if God did not need him, and how would you exist? You need God in order to be, and God needs you--for that which is the meaning of your life....and then he added two more sentences: Two great servants move through the ages: prayer and sacrifice. In prayer man pours himself out, dependent without reservation, knowing that, incomprehensibly, he acts on God, while not exacting anything from God....And those who sacrifice? I cannot despise the honest servant of the remote past who thought that God desired the smell of their burnt sacrifices: they knew in a primitive and vigorous way that one can and should give to God; and that is also know to those who offer their little wills to God and encounter him in a great will...// Our prayer must therefore be, thy will be done, through me whom you need. Today we have before us one of the most fundamental encounters between God and man in all of Bibl revelation, text Exod 19,24. Today is the first Sun of the fall season, but it is the 4th lesson in a gr's unit on beginning of the covenant people. It is the only texts we are given from the bk of Exodus and the life of Moses, who is one of humankind's heroes of epic proportions. From Chap 2 of Exod we can read the biography of that remarkable person--and I hope that we all shall undertake to do that this week. For many of us it is one of the golden memories of childhood, of big sister Miriam and the baby Moses in the bulrushes, sleeping in safety in a tiny floating cradle. We read in awe of the plagues that buffeted Egypt, we memorized the order in which they came, and we tried to understand the power of divine intervention. The parting of the red sea, and the destruction of the Egy caval and the march to Mt. Sinai, or Horeb, as it is called in some passages, is fresh in memory. Horeb was the mountain of God where the shepherd Moses saw the burning bush and heard the call of the God whose name is I-am-here, or I am what I am. A lifetime later, that same Moses led his people Isr back to that same mountain and this time the entire nation saw the evidence and heard the call of God. Exod 19: 1-8. This is the introduction to a 5-chapter story that is central to the relig faith of Isr, of Mohammed, and of Jesus. It tells of the covenant that made the nation of Israel. Note the timing of these events. In the Hebr calendar Pentecost fell on the 6th day of the 3d month after the Passover, seven weeks or 50 days after the blood on the doorpost gave safety from the angel of death. Pentecost marks the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. The runaway slaves arrived at the foot of the mtn early in the 3d month after their escape. Some translat say it was the first day of the month. There they encamped, so the sign of promise could become real. In Ex 3:12 we are told that God said to Moses out of the burning bush, when you lead my people out of bondage, you shall serve God on this mountain. He had done what he had been sent to do, and now he must worship God as God directed him to. God gave him the most powerful text any preacher has ever had: tell the people of Israel, you have seen what I did to the Egyptians. There is no clearer word than that which comes from experience. The Bibl view of relig is that faith is based upon an historical revelation, a fact rooted in an event. What God did to the Egys, and for his people, was for them the beginning, the decisive revelation of God that set the covenant people apart from all others. This was to be the major confrontat between God and his people, the one they were to remember in an annual meal of bitter herbs and unleavened bread, and with the story retold by the oldest in the family to the youngest in the family. This is the core of the covenant--the promise of God, supported and proved by the gift of deliverance already given, unearned and undeserved, that made Isr God's special possession and instrument. From this time forth, when God spoke to his people he always began with the reminder--I am the Lord, who delivered you from the hand of the Egys. That was fact, it was tied to time and place, and all those who were encamped at the foot of that mtn knew it was a fact. We, you & I, must accept it by faith, just as we do all those other events out of the past which we call history, which we did not ourselves witness, which we have by the word of those who were witnesses. And also, we, you & I, cannot enter into a close reltshp w/God until we have had an experience w/God. The basis of the experience is the awareness of our own creature-ness, our own dependence, as children who need protection and guidance. That awareness, that experience, is the anchor, it is the stone of memory to which we return when we have lost the way, or when we get that old feeling that we do not need help or protection. For each of us there must be a starting-point, a landmark we align our lives by, the plumb-line by which we build the walls of our beings, and for each of us that starting-point may well be different. None of us has the right to tell somebody else where his experience with God must begin, or that another's experience is not authentic. God is bigger than we are; we are dependent, we must affirm our

creature-feeling. But whatever it is, from that experience we know the promise and the presence of God. We can read the Bible as a lawyer reads a will, as someone said once long ago; we can see the words and the terms of the experience. We can also read the Bible as an heir reads the will, to see all that God has done, to see that all God offers is ours if we will but accept it. It is an odd and an unexpected thing to see the heirs to the riches of God try to break the will and reject the inheritance and live with our fears and our tensions and our failures. Yet that is the tragedy that many of us call wisdom and right thinking. You have seen what I did to the Egys, God said, how I picked you up as the mother eagle dives beneath the faltering fledgling and catches it on her wings and puts it back into the nest. I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Then comes the contract, the risk-taking, v.5. If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine. There is the offer from God to mankind, that is the covenant relationship. It has two sides, and upon each there falls an obligation and a promise. Martin Buber put it: that you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know also that God needs you--in the fulness of his eternity, you? Man would not exist if God did not need him, for God is the source of all existence. Not one of us can make food, or shelter, or the air we breathe. We are dependent for everything that we are. God's invitation is to obedience and fidelity, and his promise is his presence, and that we shall attain our true potential when we confess our dependence. Righteousness is the translation of the Hebr word that means keeping the covenant, and it goes with obedience. Note that the covenant was offered with no mention as yet of the law; that will come in the next Chap. Here it was a renewal of the covenant w/Abraham. If the people will agree to be obedient and righteous then they shall form a kgdm of priests and a holy nation. This is the original description of the priesthood of all believers. Some are priests, but all are priests, and that is not a misprint. V.6 says it clearly, though there is uncertainty about it. Was it written before the rise of the professional priesthood against whose powers the prophets testified? or was it written later by one who joined in the condemnation of the priestly class, and saw it as a stage in relig developmt that had become an anachronism? We do not know. What IS certain is that God does not abdicate his power to speak directly to every individual, however rich, or learned, or wise, or strong; or however poor, or unlettered, or simple, or weak. God has no flow charts, and measures the human soul by other standards than carpets on the floor or panelling on the wall. God is no respecter of persons and seeks the obedient, the righteous, and those whose capacity to receive his presence is expansive. There is in this sentence an appeal to all people to have encounter with God, which is our spiritual heritage and birthright. If any person or any nation reject the appeal, be assured that it will be made to others, for the mainstream of human history is the story of God's offer of presence and protection to one person and one nation after another, and to see them suffer or prosper as they accepted it and remained faithful to it. For the covenant is also a risk that God accepts. There is a great difference, in that our existence is dependent upon God, but his existence is not dependent upon us. Whether we accept or reject God's offer is of great conseq to God, but it is not a determinant of God's being. God is the ground of being; in him all the creation has its existence. // So these were the words that Moses took to the elders and to the people encamped about. The key phrase is in v.3--the Lord called him out of the mountain. The older translat says it much better: the Lord called UNTo him out of the mountain. I am that I am/spoke, and in that event is the genesis of our faith. The words that God spoke were reported to the people, and they agreed to the offer. All that the Lord has spoken we will do, v.8. We know they failed, and were punished for it. But they were like the rest of us in that regard. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God, and we weep hot and bitter tears of remorse because of it. But they, like we, come closer than we would have if we had not made our resolves. To them, this moment beside the mountain was a high-spot of self-consecration. We all know such moments, and we all know how ephemeral they can be. Every morning we must renew the covenant, every hour we must remind ourselves that we need God ^{in order} to exist, and every night as the darkness enfolds us in its wings we need to dedicate ourselves again to the spirit of love and truth who created us in his own image. It may well be that we slip and fall, and lose control, and miss the mark. But to aim at the moon and hit the top of the Empire St building is to be higher than we would have been. To know the right way is the place to begin, even when we lose it, for we, with Abraham, may have faith which God reckoned as righteousness. Two things to note in the story. 1) the covenant was not with presidents and senators and governors and priests. It was between God and the people themselves. Every individual is offered the choice to be priest, part of the holy nation, the people set apart to serve God the Lord. The other thing is that the early Chrs saw themselves as the holy nation, the chosen race, the descendants of Abraham by faith, they were the royal priesthood, to declare to the world the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Pet 2:9). The covenant offer is still being made. Take it, and know the peace that passes understanding.

10-5-86. Justice. Part of the human tragedy is that few of us know the meaning of time until we see the end of it bearing down upon us. We display an arrant disrespect for the hours we are permitted/in regarding them as without end, and without value. Thoreau said that when we waste time we injure eternity, and to throw away hours on that which does not expand or rejuvenate our spirits is to cast a vote against life and soul. Trivial pursuit has, I am told, become a game people play, a fad, as if the whole idea were something new under the sun. It ought to be a major objective of education to teach people how to use work hours wisely and leisure hours profitably, for that is the key to living. Education should teach us to discriminate between the passing and the permanent, between what matters and what doesn't. High on the list of the virtues which never grow old is a reverence for justice to all people at all times. Justice is a virtue not only among the philosophers of the good life, but also among the prophets of God, for those who do justly and walk humbly obey the most fundamental of mandates. The most familiar and frequent of the expressions of mankind's scorn for the claims of eternity is our preference for a life that takes from the weak everything one desires. That is uncivilized; it is also sinful, a stench in the nostrils of a just God. What defense can we offer when we are ourselves given justice, the treatment we deserve, when we have ourselves shown no mercy or kindness to those who are helpless and have no advocate on this earth? Today we are going to consider questions of the permanent and the ethical, in a lesson on the jubilee year, text Levit 25. This fall we are following a series of sessions on the beginning of the covenant people. We have seen the covenant written into the creation, and painted in the clouds with the rainbow; we have heard the promises made to Abraham and to Moses. Now we ^{come} ~~we~~ come to a ~~tiny~~ portion of laws of righteousness. The name we give one collection of the laws is not Hebrew; it is Greek and Latin, and is taken to mean that it is the rulebook for the duties of the professional priesthood, who were of the tribe of Levi. The tidbit we have assigned us is about a dozen verses, and deals with one small part of the whole. It is all we are going to get for some years. It deserves better treatment, especially chap 26, which is a sermon that concludes the holiness code, and should be annually required reading for all thoughtful seekers after the ways of God. The entire scroll keeps before us that which matters, that which remains, and is permanent. The few lines we have tell us about the sabbatical year, and the year of jubilee, and part of the law of slavery. Levit 25: 8-12, 25-28, 39-42. This first part of this chapter tells of the sabbatical for the land, which shall rest every seventh year. The old English word is fallow. Not long ago I fell to thinking about the huge vocabulary of words that have fallen out of common speech, as we become city folk and lose our roots in the countryside. To permit land to lie fallow is an elemental farming practice in the absence of cover crops and fertilizers. This passage applies the 7th yr // the sabbath of years, to the land, to give it a time of rest and recuperation. I am old enough to have heard the old folks talk about giving the land the sabbath rest, as is required here. Some of them always set aside a rotating part of the farm to plow and then to let remain unseeded for a yr. It may be that the rule required rather that the entire farmland of the country take the same rest year, and that poses problems. But then we come to the sabbath of sabbath years, seven times seven years, and after that the 50th year which shall be hallowed, and a year of jubilee. The word jubilee is taken into English from the Hebrew word for the ram's horn, the trumpet that sounded the glad news of the holy year. On the day of atonement the trumpet would be heard in all the land, in the yr of jubilee, the year of the ram's horn. V.10 is carved upon the liberty bell in Philad, the one that pealed out the tidings of independence, and which was cracked tolling the death of John Marshall in 1835. Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants, it says, and that is the meaning we give to the word jubilee. In 1865, at the close of the civil war, when the slaves were given their freedom, they sang a joyful song about the year of Jubilo, because the president and people proclaimed liberty throughout the land to every one of its inhabitants, and not just to a few. Two lifetimes earlier Thomas Jefferson had declared that the creator had not made some human beings with saddles on their backs, and some others booted and spurred to ride on them. That is the meaning of the jubilee. It shall bring liberty to all who are bound, or ridden, or oppressed. Anyone who has had to sell his inherited land because of a bad crop-year, with a bad loan, and a foreclosure, gets his land back from the creditor, and gets to go back home. That is what it means to proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all inhabitants. Imagine what it would mean in the present. We no longer have debtors' prisons, nor do we put in jail those who make debts they cannot pay. From the wealthiest two-billionaires in Dallas to the poorest sharecropper on a peonage farm, we offer the bankruptcy loophole. Even when it is grossly abused, it is still a merciful and a moral thing to do. But I read recently that in the depressed middle of our land, one in five farmers will go out of business because they cannot repay what they owe. ~~What would happen?~~ Many of those farms are inherited from the glory-days of the homestead act, and have been in the family to the 3d and 4th generation. Now they will be lost to the creditor, and the family will no longer be able to go to the place called home. Imagine what it would be like to have the sound of the ram's horn, the shofar that still calls the faithful to the atonement, yom hakkippurim, in the high holy

days following the Jewish new year, to have the sound of the trumpet proclaim liberty throughout the land, and everyone shall return to his piece of earth and to his family. The idea of the return is fundamental to the faith of Israel, arise and return to God, you who have sinned against his holy name. The year of the jubilee is the covenant in the calendar, in the counting of years, and sabbaths of years, twice a century. Justice to the down-and-out, to the last, and the least among us, is our way of asking God for mercy in judging our faults and failures. V.17 is the text: you shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for ^I am the Lord your God. Remember, and return, Oh my people, for wrongs have a way of cutting the hand that does the wrong. The second part of this passage, beginning w/v.25, gives the law of redeeming lands which have been lost to the mortgage-holder. If anyone in your family falls upon evil times, and must sell their property in order to pay their obligations, every one in the family is required to assist in redeeming it. The community, the extended family, should consider whether the obligation affects them, and what each of us owes to the less fortunate. Feeling a need in the neighborhood, or in the global village in which we live, and doing something about it, is called charity, and that I read, has fallen itself upon evil times. Last month the Rockefeller Foundation released a study of American philanthropy, the contributions we make to all support causes. Overall we give 4.1% of our income to charity; but the baby-boom generation, the me-people, are misers with their money. People under age 37 give 1.4% of income. Can we expect to receive mercy when we show so little mercy to hungry, homeless, victims of injustice? But note here the repeated proclamation: in the 50th yr, in the year of jubilee, those who are well off should repay the money to the redeemer of his land, and those who are poor are released from obligation and shall return to their homes. The third part describes the law of slavery. No Hebrew may be enslaved to a Hebrew, though he may serve his buyer as hired servant and sojourner, and that only until the year of jubilee. Foreigners you may enslave, in perpetuity, as an inheritance to your sons, but not your own brothers. When the idea of brotherhood expanded to include all human beings everywhere, which is the teaching of the prophets and of Jesus the Christ, then did slavery as an economic system collapse. V.42, they are my servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: they shall not be sold as slaves. Of all the earth's people, those who knew intimately the serpent's bite of slavery should not wish that curse upon any other of God's children. Those of us who are in bondage to our creator, for life and breath and talent and time, should love neighbor whoever he is, and set him free from bondage to evil, or to habit, or sensual laxity, or drug addiction, or disease. Because we are all God's children, whether we own walking shoes or not, we are brothers and sisters to all of humanity. The prohibition against slavery thus extends to all flesh and blood. This then is a small taste of the book of Leviticus, which is the holiness code by which we all should live. It reminds us that we belong to God, and that none of us can ever forget that and keep our human-ness.

In The part of it we have read, the people of the covenant are taught to practice justice toward their fellow human beings, and when there is an injustice it must be corrected in a general release from obligations every 50 years. What the Athenians called the shaking off of burdens, that happened only once, was to be a regular procedure to them. Those who had lost their freedom were to recover it, and those who had lost lands were to get them back. Last week we read how God heard and responded to the cries of the people who were driven to work in Pharaoh's brickyards. Today we read of God's concern for people everywhere who are deprived of dignity and freedom and justice. About this fact there are some things we should emphasize. One is that God is no respecter of persons. It is a continuing temptation to us to create God in our own image. What I find most frightening about what is called among us the religious right is the heresy that God is an American, perhaps fair of skin, and certainly protestant. Last June when a new president was elected in SBC a man who had served once before--the extremists are running out of people they can trust--the outgoing president read a letter from Pres Reagan declaring the election a victory for one kind of believer over another. The applause was a measure of the division among the brethren. But God sends his rain to fall upon just and unjust, he is God of all, including the slave, the debtor, and the defeated. All people belong to God, and so no people are to be entrapped or conned or used for the pleasure or profit of another. It says something important about God to say that. It is a giant oak towering above the underbrush of our selfish and short-sighted schemes. It is an enduring truth not a passing fad, not a trivial pursuit. People paid less than a living wage/whether in a Carolina bean patch or a textile mill or in the gulag archipelago of the workers' paradise, will know in time the meaning of justice. It also says something important about our attitudes and practices.

Justice is something every one of us can understand. The youngest child who cries that something is not fair knows what justice is, and the cruellest taskmaster who exacts a pound of flesh without fair payment knows what justice is. Justice is not written in the fine print. Justice shouts her judgments, for blindfolded/she sees into the heart of mankind. Justice to the weak is our prayer to God for mercy, and is evidence of faith in a moral universe. It is at the heart of the contract which we call covenant. Proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all its inhabitants.

10-12-86. Joshua. Mankind has been called the choosing animal, because he along among God's creatures faces the burden, or the opportunity, to be whatever she wants to be. Pigs have to be pigs, robins must spend all their waking hours ceaselessly searching for food, cows munch and then chew what they have munched. But man! God has made him little lower than the angels, and has put all of creation under his dominion. We can be pigs; it is not attractive, nor productive, but it is possible to us. In fact, I understand that to be an insult to pigs, who are actually well mannered and clean and do not overeat when they can be placed in the proper sty. But it is in the choosing that we make of ourselves either the commendable or the condemned, the rude or the mannerly. Life presents us choices, and we ^{decide} ~~choose~~ between them, and the rest of our lives is determined by the choice we made, sometimes even when we were not aware of the fact that we were choosing. All of eternity sometimes hangs upon a sudden intuition, or an idle wish. But above and beyond all that, there are fundamental turnings along the road that we all come to, and decide upon, that make us what we are from that point on. This morning we have a lesson about choosing, text Joshua 24. This fall we are studying a series of lessons about the beginning of the covenant people, and today we are at the midpoint in the course. It is basic to Bibl revelat that our God is a covenant God, and that is important for us to know. Covenant is a legal term, for contract, or agreement, between two parties, each of which bind themselves to do something, in return for what the other has pledged to do. It is a form of barter, in which one will deliver coal, or bread, and the other will pay out of his time and muscle and brain whatever the seller asks. That, the Bibl tells us, is the way God approaches every one of us. I will be your God, and you will be my people. You will receive my presence, which is the greatest gift mankind can know, if you remain constant in your love and loyalty to me. We bind ourselves, and then find ourselves free, as we were meant to be, happy, filled with peace and joy, able to be fully human because we begin by confession of creature-ness, and of dependence. But God also binds himself, God also limits his omnipotence, God also takes a risk that his gently-offered love will be rejected, and that the race he created will find not joy but disaster. In a universe created and dominated by a God who lives under law, who can be depended upon to do as he has promised, the universe itself can be studied, and understood, and lived with in peace and contentment. That is why the covenant concept is so important. We have seen the creation as a covenant, and we read also of the rainbow in the clouds, and the promise to Abram in a distant civilization, and to Moses in the desert. Now we come to a renewal of the covenant, at the end of the life of Joshua, who commanded the people who went in and possessed the land that God had promised to give them. The few verses we have today ^{are} ~~are~~ the only ones we shall have as assignment this time around. It has some high moments, and some thought material, that we need to know about. The word Joshua is a variant spelling of Jesus, and means the same thing: one who saves. Whoever wrote it, and whenever it was put into the form we now have, it is a book of history, for it tells of the conquest of Palestine. It is a book of theology, for its theme is that God reveals himself in history, by what happens in the world. It is also a book of the judgmt of God, for the time it describes was one of wide-spread and flagrant relig transgression. Wealth and ease of living brought corruption and immorality. The public expression and private practice of relig was at a low point; altars and idols to false gods were erected, sexual infidelity was so common that scarcely an eye was raised at the evidence, mammon replaced God as the object of worship. And because human nature is much the same in each generation, the story Joshua tells is sadly and grimly relevant to these days in which we live. All those who can sing with Swinburne, Glory to Man in the highest, for man is the master of all things, should take seriously the words of Joshua, for much of it is addressed to that attitude. The part of it that we have before us this morning tells of a revival meeting in which all the people were rededicated and renewed. Josh 24: 1, 14-24. This chapter concludes the book, and clearly it is out of place. The book ends with chap 23, with the final sermon of Joshua to the entire nation, and that leads directly to the next bk, Judges, chap 2, v.6. This chap 24, and the first of Judges, do not belong here, though no one knows exactly where they belong. I am glad this chapter survived, even if it broke its anchor and drifted a bit, for the first paragraph is one of the best accts anywhere of the God who works in history. V. 1 tells us that the chapter, just like the one before it, is a message to all the people. It was at Shechem, which is near Nablus, and already an ancient shrine, so that we are told that the nation presented itself before God. The message itself does not belong at the end of Joshua's life, but it does fit into the developing story of the conquest. Anyone who is interested might look at 8:30 off for an earlier version of the altar erected in Mt Ebal, which is the site of Shechem. It could have been done twice, and if so it is another indication of the shifting sands of the national faith and obedience. But we must lepp over the account of the God of history to get to the renewal of the covenant. And note that it is a therefore commitment, v.14. Looking backward across the pages of history, as Joshua asked his people to do, revealed the hand of God at work in everything that happened. Not by your sword or your bow did God drive the Amorites before you; I gave you the land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and oliveyards and vineyards

you did not plant. Now therefore fear the Lord. We cannot take the credit for anything that we are, or have, or do, for God has moved before we asked, before we knew, to give us what we need. Facts, events, battles won and lost, food supplied and shelter given; it is the Bibl faith that our faith is based upon history. And therefore, because of that, we must never cease upholding our side of the covenant bargain. Joshua the old warrior shouts a warning across the centuries from his time to ours, and at the same time he repeats a promise. Trust God and he will never let you down. Forget God and catastrophe hangs heavy over the land. Our motive/is in our understanding of experience out of the past. God has done much for us, now therefore fear the Lord. It does not work when we say/ we trust God so he will do something to or for us. We are in God's debt, not he in ours. No deed or word from us can pay even the most microspopic fragment of our debt. No, we see by faith what God has done, and then, and therefore, we put our trust in him. He always meets us where we are, not where we ought to be. So Joshua's valedictory address tells us to put away all that we depend upon in life, all except the living God of our fathers. Put away the narcotic drugs we think we need, put away the temptation to praise Mankind from whom all blessings flow, put away that troublesome self we have on our hands, and serve the Lord. We must make a choice. Which shall it be: the Lord, or the local gods your fathers served east of the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, the people who were in the land before Joshua led them into it. Choose this day whom you will serve. There is the challenge, and there are three choices. One was the God who had worked in history to bring them to this place. Another was the gods of the years long before, when Abraham lived among the Chaldeans and had not left the security of the known. There are always those who want to hold onto the gods of our childhood, the teddy bear god we hug at night, the gods who never grow up, for people who never become adult. They want the same hymns, the same prayers, and the same small god they knew at the beginning. The other choice was to live just like the people of Canaan lived, to take moral standards from the surrounding people, when in Rome do as the Romans do--and would anyone be surprised to know that in Italy the proverb is put differently? Are these not the decisions we are ourselves asked to make? Shall we go thru life longing for the things that are past and gone, or shall we imitate what we see around us, so we do not resist the pressures of our peers, so we change our colors as we change our company? But then there is that third something, the Lord God of Israel, who had done everything that had happened to them, who had redeemed them from slavery and had led them to this altar. And even before the people cast their vote, Joshua made it clear what side he was on. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. This is the confession of the God-centered life. Every one of us is challenged to make the same choice, and the same confession, (even though the words we use are different). Shall it be the way of God or the way of the world? shall it be the Chr gospel or the materialism of a passing age? shall it be sensual paganism or the good news of salvation? Life is forever confronting us with the demand to choose. Will it be for us the God of eternity or the spirit of this age? will it be unwavering principle or sleazy getting by? will it be the permanent or the passing? Choose ye this day. And the people responded to Joshua's challenge. vv.16-18 is the voluntary confession. God never compels obedience and worship; it is our choice that God wants, and it flows out of experience. Those people chose the God who had done mighty works for them, not those false gods of wealth and sensual pleasure that look so glittering and yet give only degradation and self-disgust. W/o God's love they would have failed, even as we would ourselves; they confessed it & promised to serve him. But Joshua was not sure they understood what they were going. It is never enough to SAY we will serve God; we must DO//inside and out. So Josh put the question again; you cannot serve God, he said, and he was not denying them the rt to serve God, but instead//that they lacked the courage and the constancy to do so. It is not an easy thing to walk by faith in a dark and threatening world. God is holy, he is jealous, he will not accept the partial, the half-way covenant many of us prefer. The warning that Joshua sends us across the years is that it is a dangerous thing to enter into a promise with God and then not keep it. If you forsake God and serve other gods, those glittering and perfumed symbols of man's rebellion against his real self, the living God will do you harm and bring your nation to an end. God promises his presence when we obey, but when we ignore his presence the covenant is broken. And again the people said, we will serve the Lord. Still a third time Joshua ~~asked~~ asked them to be sure they understood. You are witnesses against yourselves that you have made your choice, he said; and they answered as if in responsive chorus, we are witnesses. He said, then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and the people again responded, we will serve the Lord our God, and him only. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day at Shechem, and it is unlike the others we have read this fall. The covenant of the rainbow did not require human action; the covenants w/Abrah & Moses were made by God, but they required human agreemt. This covenant has been humanized; it is between Joshua & the people. So every one of us can invite every other one of us to enter into the covenant. It is a thing we need to do every morning and every night, for memory is short, and forgetfulness is strong. Choose you, all of us, this day, whom you will serve.

God is dead, signed Nietzsche - -

10-19-86. David. One of the most provocative thinkers in all that iconoclastic 19th Century of upsettings and upheavals was the German Friedrich Nietzsche. Just over a century ago, 1882, he published what turned out to be his last collections of aphorisms, those barbed comments upon the accepted verities that had such an influence upon the world's intellectuals. One of the most barbed paragraphs is entitled the madman, an allegory of a man considered insane, who ran into the marketplace waving a lantern. He was not looking for truth, he was looking for God. I seek God, he shouted, and the bystanders ridiculed him. Did God get lost? they asked; is he hiding? And the madman replied, we have killed God, you and I. Do we not feel the breath of empty space? has it not become colder? Must not all lanterns be lit in the morning? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet known has bled to death under our knives. The most awful crime, and we have done it to ourselves. And then, Nietzsche wrote, the madmen entered ~~the~~ the churches in the city to sing a requiem aeternam deo, let the eternal God rest in peace. As he left them he shouted, What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God? It is a good question, whatever we may think of Nietzsche and his campaign to make us think in new ways about old truths. Is it possible that our churches and temples and mosques and synagogues are tombs of God, not springs from which flow living waters that redeem us and renew our beings? Is it possible that for all these imposing and elaborate structures we erect to the glory of God, there remain more sermons in stones than in pulpits, more anthems in babbling brooks and the song of the mocking bird, more compelling prayers in the face of an infant in the Sudan/dying of starvation? It is not a simple matter to know how far to go in building a beautiful place of worship, for we of the faith want to give God our very best, and yet when we do it can produce unintended opposition. People criticise the expenditure when there are poverty and misery around us; the shape and form of the building, its pleasing proportions, its harmonious symmetry, might become an end in itself, a form of idolatry that gets between us and God who is spirit and truth, not stones and mortar. There are those among us, unfortunately, who take pleasure in poking fun at the quaint names the simple believers give their groups, but the store-front church, the open-air meeting, may be closer to the creator than the most elaborate cathedral church in all the world. That is the subj of the lesson we have for today, text II Saml 7. This fall we are doing a series of lessons on the beginning of the covenant people, which is the survey of the history of the chosen people, who were invited by a just & dependable God to enter into an agreement, a contract, which bound both sides of it. We call it covenant. Churches have covenants, married couples have covenants, this college has had a covenant relatshp with the Bp Conv of this state. When people enter into an agreement, we can understand that; but when God Almighty enters into an agreement with people, that binds his own power as it demands our faithfulness, that is a miracle, ~~and~~ unexpected/as it is undeserved. We know about the covenant people; we need to give thanks to a covenant God. Today's lesson is taken from II Sam 7, in which the word covenant does not appear at all, though there is a promise to David that is in the nature of a covenant. It is something of a surprise that we should be assigned this chapter. One of my continuing criticisms of the lesson outlines is that so often they omit the difficult and the controversial. This time they have proved my complaints to be misplaced II Sam 7 is one of the most controversial chaps in all the OT, and presents us ~~the~~ ^{with} the most problems; about it there have been heated debates. It deals w/David's desire to build for God a beautiful temple, and the unexpected response he got. To discuss David we must move forward about 3 cns in time from our last lesson, which was about Joshua and the renewal of the covenant at Shechem. We all know about David; I bear his name, which I consider an honor given me by my mother, who named me for her favorite cousin as well as for Israel's poet-king. He was a man after God's own heart, & was at the same time a human being subject to all the weaknesses that afflict our race. His biogr// I Sam 16 thru I Kgs 2// is a masterpiece from the ancient world, a model for all biogrs ever since. He is shown to be a great king and a mighty warrior, ~~but~~ who was tempted and committed adultery and then murder to cover up his sin. His children brought him grief and pain; nowhere in all of literature is there a more tortured cry than his Absalom my son, my son Absalom, would that I had died instead of you.// It is the Hebr version of the Grk tragedy, and it has the power to move us all to tears. When we see him in the brief glimpse we have for today, the only David story we have in this cycle of lessons, he is about to make a very big mistake from the very best of intentions. It is at a time when his battles were for the moment at an end, there was a peace with the Philistines, David became aware of the great disparity between the comfort and luxury of the royal palace and the humble tent that served as the tabernacle of God. II. Sam 7: 1-3. Nathan was the prophet of Jerusalem and a member of David's court. David went to him and said, Look here, I am ashamed to be living in such splendour--he had ordered cedarwood from the Kg of Tyre for his palace, the same fragrant tree that is today on the flag of Lebanon, that tortured land--while the sacred ark of God, the container in which were the tables of the Law, Aaron's rod that budded, and a golden pot which had held manna in the wilderness, (is still in a tent). That's not right; let's do something about it. Nathan promptly agreed; anything people do for God must be right, and correct, and com-

lay person in pew

women

mendable. Go to it, he said; let's get an architect and a builder, and let some contracts. But in fact he was making a very big mistake, a mistake that many of us make at one time or another. Even more in error, Nathan blessed David's good intentions. II Sam 7: 4-7. Right here is where the debate begins in trying to find the meaning of these lines. First, we need to note that Nathan was big enough, and confident enough, to admit that he had been wrong. God came to him in the night, and gave him a msg to deliver to David. Here is a genuine prophet, a sincere spokesman for God, who made a false assumption about the nature and purposes of God. In a way, that is a comforting thing, for it happens to the best of us, as it did to Nathan. Frequently enough to be embarrassing preachers and teachers make mistakes in applying the word of God to a particular situation. Some yrs ago somebody sued a minister who gave counsel in a troubled marriage, advice which broke up the home. Since that time, some of us have bought liability insurance which is now difficult to find. Back in the happier days, when the local newspaper regularly printed the columns of Sydney Harris, he said that vanity is the greatest enemy among professionals of all kinds, and it is marked by an inability to admit an error in judgment. Nathan made a quick judgment, and then he learned that it was a mistake. He did not send a public relations officer to meet the press, nor did he make a mistake appear to be brilliant diplomacy. In Nathan's state dept there was no communicator who had to resign rather than practice deceit and lying to the people. Everyone who works to apply the will of God to human probs must be zealously self-critical, and must study the best that human science can learn, before saying, thus saith the Lord. But even more striking is the reason we find here for God's rejection of an elaborate temple. God said, you tell my servant David that his understandable, and eminently sincere desire to glorify God with a temple, was wrong, and was wrong because neither he nor the prophet understood the nature of God. In the wilderness wanderings the tent or tabernacle was the visible symbol of God's presence with his people wherever they went. That was of profound significance to ancient people, it was a theological revolution. Primitive people find it easy to believe that one spot is more sacred than another, and that god is limited to this or that place. Gods were associated with a particular hill-top, or grove of trees, or cave in the hillside. Gods were local. That God was universal, and everywhere, and moved about with his people was one of those major milestones on the road to mature insight in man's awareness of God's majesty and sovereignty. Last wk we heard Joshua challenging people to choose this day whom you will serve, and in part he did that to break the prevailing notion that gods were local deities, and that by moving into the land of Canaan they must adopt the gods of the Canaanites; who were Baals. So Nathan admitted his mistake. God does not dwell in houses, but is found wherever his people are. Never, in all their wanderings, did God ever complain about the room service, or the housing. There are 2 things we need to note about God's revelation to Nathan. ONE is that the reason given here for denying David's request is more profound, much more theologically mature, than is the reason given in the parallel accts. It is a fact that is particularly meaningful to the Bibl inerrantists. Compare this version with the one in I Chron 22:8 and I Chron 28:2ff. There we read that David had it in his heart to do this thing, but his hands were bloody, he was a warrior. That was not the real reason God rejected David's wish to do something to show his reverence for God. The real reason was that it would be a falling away from the worship of God as universal spirit of all mankind; it would be a step backward toward the pagan view, the universal opinion of the time, that gods were local and limited. To build a house for God would be accept that limited and childish view. It would give men control of God, so they could put him where they want him, lock the door, and do as they please. One of the old-time commentators put it like this: a gorgeous stone temple, with cedar panelling, might easily become the sepulchre rather than the shrine, of true devotion...the more fixed and elaborate the externals of worship, the more danger of the spirit's being stifled by them. And how did Nietzsche's madman put it: what are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of the God we have killed? God's warning to David was, do not reduce the worship of God to an institution, with letterhead stationery and an air-conditioner and a cushion in the pew. God is bigger than that; he is not fixed or located, he is forever on the move, always out there ahead of us, striking his tents and resuming the march to a new location in history, in revelation, in love and concern. The cathedral psychology is dangerous because it represents man's most flagrant sin--to possess God, to tie him down to time and place, to make God serve us instead of our serving God. The OTHER thing we need to note is God's dealing with the sincere but mistaken David, II Sam 7: 8-16. David made a mistake in trying to limit God as the pagans do, but God did not condemn him. Instead we have this hymn to the house of David. The scholars say that it was originally a psalm, the parallel is Psa 89. They also find another problem, in v.13--how could God condemn David's plan of wishing to build a house for God, to institutionalize public worship, to bind God to one place, and then say that David's son would do the very same thing? But there are 2 voices in these lines. There should always be a tension between the tent and the temple, between an appointed place for public worship, and a faith in a God larger than the entire universe, between priest at his altar, and prophet in the streets. God is not dead, brother Nietzsche, nor must temples be tombs. May we know the fulness of God, in sanctuary and in the adventure of life.

this is anti-instit teaching, yet we need instit, cannot exist w/o

10-26-86. Revolt of North. In a recent biography of Lyndon Johnson, Robert Caro declares that the greatness of America in this century came and went in the four years from 1964 to 1968. In 1964 Johnson won what was called at the time the greatest electoral victory that any man ever won in an election of free peoples. His term was called the great society, with educational and civil rights acts, and a war on poverty, that brought to a climax the social currents that ran through the earlier years of the century. It was a personal triumph, except for viet-nam. The high-water mark of this century's flood-tide ended with 1000s chanting, hey, he, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today? Since those days of doubt and despair there has been an air of decline, of twilight after noonday, about this country's behavior. But before we leave LBJ to the protesters we should hear some lines from his inaugural address twenty years ago, and yet in another age, another galaxy. He spoke in moving tones of the covenant Amers agreed to. "Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people and on their faith. They came here--the exile & the stranger, brave but frightened--to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind, and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish...The Amer covenant called on us to help show the way for the liberation of man, and that is our goal. If as a nation there is much outside our control, as a people no stranger is outside our hope...For we are a nation of believers...in justice and liberty and union...We believe that every man must some day be free." And then came what appeared to be an inflexible arrogance that brought divisions and grief, rather than joy and peace. The name of Lyndon Johnson is not in my Bible, but his story is found in many of its pages. We have one of them for our text this morning in I Kgs 12. Today we begin the 2d half of our yr's series on Bibl history, the beginning of the covenant people. To keep up with the assignments we must move so fast that we can look only at the high spots, and few enough of them. Last week we saw David at the height of his power learn that he would not be permitted to build a permanent home for God because God did not wish to be tied to a specific place. But paradoxically the construction of the temple was permitted to David's son Solomon, whom we leap right over in these sessions. Today we look at David's grandson, Solomon's son, Jeroboam, and the folly that led to rebellion and civil war and division of the Kgdm into 2 separate parts. First we need the background to the revolt of the 10 northern tribes. It began with the greatness and glory of Solomon and his empire, which is described in the opening chapters of I Kgs. Beginning w/chap 11 there is the sad ending to a glorious beginning. We read of immoralities and unrighteousness in the court of the wise and benevolent King. Solomon's wisdom could not save him from his own search for pleasures and delights. In the eyes of the scribes who wrote the acct, Solomon's crime was that he married women from among those pagan nations ~~whom~~ whom marriage was forbidden, and then he allowed his numerous wives to turn his heart away from Yahweh to idolatrous alliances to their own local gods. Wisdom comes in odd sizes and shapes when it can do that to us. The sad tragedy of Solomon tells us that at the height of our strength we are at our weakest, and that in the wise there is a foolishness that the less intelligent could never commit. We can be safe and secure only when we remain humble, childlike in our dependence upon our Maker and defender, never ceasing to confess that whatever strength and skill and sense and talent we have is not ours but is a gift of God. Solomon the wise became Solomon the guilty. Still, God would not visit punishment upon him, but promised to stay his hand until after Solomon's death. When you die, God told the errant king, then will I seize the kgdm out of the hand of your heirs, I will destroy what you have united..So the divided Kgdm was the product of Solomon's misbehavior, and the burden which he had to bear all the remaining days of his life. Those people, like Lyndon Johnson's Americans, had made a covenant; they knew, like LBJ's Americans, that they would flourish if they kept the terms of the covenant. They, like our own, broke the covenant, and suffered divided families and divided nationality because of it. In this case it was compulsory labor at the command of Solomon to build the elaborate structures he designed in Jerusalem. Jeroboam succeeded to Solomon's throne, and Rehoboam, another son of Solomon by a different mother, led a protest party to the new Kg. Your father made our yoke heavy; if you make it lighter we will serve you. It was a protest of overworked and oppressed people, second class citizens called upon to do the first class hard work, and they wanted their liberty. Rehoboam the Kg called in a group of the elders and asked them what course he should take. To a man they advised loosening the bondage. But the new king then called in the younger men, those yuppies and umpies who enjoyed a good time and knew how to have one when somebody else does the work, said no, you tell your people they get no time off, they must keep on mopping and scrubbing the floor while we live it up at the fun spots in the county. That is where we begin reading, I Kg 12: 12-17, 25-29. The passage begins with the summit conference between the half-brothers, the Boam brothers, Jerry and Reho, a meeting that could have made peace and union, but which broke up into secession of the north (now, there's a switch). My father made your yoke a heavy one, Rehoboam sneered, but I will add to it; my father drove you to work by whipping you, but I will chastise you with scorpions. Not the poisonous spider-like crea-

creature with the stinger in its tail, but a scourge, a whip with spikes tied to a long bag of sand, for especially cruel punishment; the Romans used a thing like that and called it a scorpion. So the Kg did not care for the sufferings of the people of the north, and gave them no hope that he would lighten their tax burden so he could continue his easy life. He had no understanding of the seriousness of the grievance, which often happens to the ruling classes. The reference in v. 15 to the prophecy of the rebellion is to the previous chapter. The reply of the down-trodden in v. 16 is in the original a poem, which the new translation makes clear in the printing. What portion have we in David? There is an identical cry of revolt in II Sam 20, that time against David himself, and not as here against his house and lineage. It is possible that the People of Jeroboam knew that earlier complaint, and deliberately quoted it here as an added argument. To your tents, O Israel, they said. It is not a war-cry, it does not mean To Arms, but it means let's be moving, roll up your tents and pack them and let's head for home. The poem ends with the words, look now to your OWN house, David. The Engl version adds the own, for emphasis, for that is the meaning of the original. The sense of the poem is the complete breaking of the connection between the two groups. The North had 10 of the 12 tribes, and their land was called Ephraim, and later Samaria. The South had the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and the one tribe of Judah. The 12th tribe was Benjamin, depleted by civil war with David, so that only a small remnant remained. That few remained loyal to Judah in the division of the kgdm, and kept its identity so that nearly a 1000 yrs later Saul of Tarsus boasted of his Benjaminitic lineage. But now the southern Kgdm, the tribe of Judah, may be correctly called Jewish. To the north Jeroboam entered vigorously into the task of nation-building out of the 10 seceding tribes. He knew he had to replace Jerusalem and the temple as the preferred place of worship, or he would have no nation over which to be king. It was political necessity that led Jeroboam to forbid the relig pilgrimages to Jerusalem. He needed a local substitute for the worship of God in the holy city of Zion. Reconstruction of the old union would come quickly if people thought they would not be forgiven unless they offered their sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. Jeroboam's life was at stake, for he would be killed if his kgdm were swallowed up in the old one. He had what looked to him like good reason to close his border-crossing points to Jerusalem-bound worshippers. For most of recorded history, that tiny and rocky land has known closed borders and divided cities and incessant warfare; free transit has been a hope and rarely a reality. But the argument offered was one of convenience. It would be too much bother to you to journey so far to worship, you have gone up to Jerus long enough. Here are ~~the~~ two golden bulls right in your own neighborhood. One of them was put up at Beth-el, which means the House of God, an old shrine where Abraham had worshipped and Jacob had received the renewal of the covenant. Jeroboam's capital was that same Shechem, at the foot of Mt. Gerizim, where Abraham had worshipped when first he came into the land. The other golden idol was in the farthest northern tribal area. So it was easier to do your worshipping nearby, even though the calf was the representation of the Syrian gods worshipped by those around them. Save yourself some trouble, and hassle, and parking problems. Let's have a drive-in church, let's make it easy. Now I am wholeheartedly in favor of making relig more meaningful to people, to make of faith a living thing rather than a set of prescribed words we do not understand, even to take the proclamation of the triumph over death of the incarnate son of God where people are. But there is something inherently spurious about an appeal to convenience. Faith is not easy, nor can the way of the faithful be easy as this world measures ease. There is for every one of us a via dolorosa, a path of grief, sorrow, and pain; there is a Gethsemane and there is a cross. To speak of flowery beds of ease, and an easy faith that does not cost anything, is to deceive. That is disinformation. How did Geo Washington put it: father, I cannot tell a disinformation. That relig that serves our wishes instead of our needs is offering a superstition, a substitute faith that will not serve us when the going gets rough. A gospel that makes us feel good instead of being good has missed the fundamental truth that faith demands our total commitment. A relig that does not confront us with the difficult alternatives is froth and not broth; a relig that does not grab us by the nape of the neck and shake us until we know our guilt and change our ways is a free trip to destruction. A relig that makes no demands upon us also makes no change in us, and is therefore so unimportant that it makes no difference whether we commit ourselves or go our own way. Entry into the kgdm of God is free, but it is not cheap. It cost God the very best he could send us, and if it brings us no spiritual warfare with ourselves and with our world we live in, then we have not enlisted in the right cause. Idolatry is taking the means by which we worship God, and making them the ends which we worship. It may be a book, or a creed, or a pile of bricks and stones, or it may be our selves. To adopt the relig symbols of the people about us to worship and to assimilate evil. The pagans who had inhabited the land earlier had been killed or driven off, but they were winning the war when the Israelites adopted their gods and erected idols on their style and model. To worship the creation rather than the creator is idolatry, whether it be a golden calf or a brilliant sunset. When we worship anything other than the covenant God we shall know punishment. How did Lyndon put it? We made a covenant; if we keep it we flourish. ~~But~~ May it be in all of us humbly to confess, and live.

Monstrous fast-food idols, right down the street.

11-2-86. Isr Falls. To a historian, the rise and fall of nations is one of the most compelling subjects to study, and at the same time one of the most mysterious. Many people have been puzzled by the decline and collapse of great empires and civilizations that were rich and strong and confident, and at the same time there is the problem of explaining the rise to wealth and power and cultural brilliance of previously obscure people. The historian Arnold Toynbee studied 26 civilizations, 16 of them dead, nine of the remaining 10 broken down and in trouble. Toynbee spoke of a rhythm of disintegration that infects all communities and ultimately brings them to disruption and ~~disintegration~~ ^{disintegration}. Why that happens is the hist's puzzle, and there have been some provocative and thoughtful answers offered to it. Not quite a century ago, in 1895, the Amer historian Brooks Adams published the law of civiliz & decay. Much of it has been tried and found wanting, but what remains of value is that the end of things is as much an historical as it is a theological conception. Nothing tangible is forever, all human arrangements have their time-limits, and at base the thing that all failed social arrangements have in common is greed and selfishness that brings spiritual disintegration, after which comes economic and military deficits and then defeat. Today we are ^{Not} going to read and discuss one small nation that died of internal failure before it was invaded & destroyed by an enemy, text 2 Kgs 17. Today we begin the final month, 5 lessons, of our yr's study of the beginning of the covenant people. It is a brief survey of the history of the chosen people, from the creation which is made for us, to the return from the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. In all of it the theme is of the covenant, the contract, the agreement, between God and his people, and it is an amazing idea. It is basic to all relig that people should order their lives in accordance with the will and way of God. But that God would limit his absolute power to act, because he made an agreement with mankind, that is audacity. And yet that is what we find shining forth in splendor all through this book. God said, I will be your God, and you shall be my people, and all shall be well with you so long as you are obedient and keep the promise. The other side of the covenant is the judgment that comes upon us when we ignore the warnings and try to get by without God. Jesus said that the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. And so they are, in their generation. But what of eternity? The children of darkness are evil because they acknowledge no law beyond the self. A me-generation, and there never has been a time when the entire population was so selfish, a me-generation is doomed however wise they may appear. Reinhold Niebuhr, in a basic book that continues to instruct and inspire thought, from 1944, the children of light and the children of darkness, says that the children of light are virtuous because they are less selfish, but they are foolish because they underestimate the power of evil and darkness loose in the world. Even the best of us, in the name of tolerance and goodwill, and sentimentality, tempt the judgment when we cease to proclaim the presence of the KgdM of God, and stop inviting all people to enter it, and know peace and security that passes all human understanding. Wake up, people, down that road lies the land of danger. That is the lesson we have today, and it is clear in the wording that it was intended to be an object-lesson, a philosophy lesson in a acted drama, a tragedy that should teach us the folly of disobedience. Last wk we read of the rebellion of the 10 tribes of the north, against the Jerusalem monarchy and the richly decorated temple of Solomon. Today we leap forward 200 yrs, from Solomon to the end of the northern kgdm, from 10th century b.c. to 8th century. Only 3 kgs reigned over the united kgdm, ^{before} and it was broken into two parts. For over a century the northern kgdm lived apart, and grew farther from the covenant God and closer to the fertility cults, the Baals and the Astartes, the sensual and undemanding gods, who are the projections of our own cravings, and are our own rationalizations of our ^{own} selfishness, made into substitute Gods who let us do whatever we want to do. In every generation there are many among us who create Gods in our own image, and then worship ourselves--our nerve-ends, our glands, our definitions of the good life. We do not call our gods Baals, or Astoreths, but we know them as credit cards with no bills to pay, pleasure w/o responsibility, self the only measure of good & bad. Surely a god who made us with taste-buds on our tongues would not consign us to a pit of eternally burning brimstone if we let our taste-buds do the talking for us, now would He? Judgment, what's that? There is only today, so live it up. And the paradox is that that is what God wants for all of us. But not self first and foremost, dependence and awareness of creaturehood; an humble heart however rich the sauce. Gradually, and then faster, Israel's spirit disintegrated, the bright candle of faith flickered and began to smoke. And then came the invader. 2 Kgs 17: 6-8, 13-18. Here in 9 verses is one of the saddest stories in all this book, for it is the end of a chapter in the human story, the death of the dream of independence and a happy life in the land which God had promised those people. Let us begin by admitting that there are variant ways of reading the account of the disappearance of most of the chosen people. The enemy was Assyria, a new empire in the middle east, whose descendants remain at war with the people of Israel, but who dropped a syllable, and who moved westward from Nineveh in the rich valley. The historian tells the story of the siege and fall of Samaria in terms of power politics and warfare; Israel's leadership underestimated the strength and determination of Assyria, and made alliance with Egypt to rebell

✓ End of prophetic warning = Deut 6:10 (instead we should know)
Hosea 13:4

against the aggressive invaders. They gambled on victory, and they lost. No ancient power, and few modern ones, permit hostile action against the dominance or interests of the strong. Look at Afghanistan, or in our own periphery, Nicaragua. There are, then, reasons clear and obvious for the fall of the kgdm of Israel, purely in human terms, of misguided judgment and foolish blunders. But to the writers of this history of the kgs of north and south, the reasons lay within the failure of the people Israel to keep their promises, the covenant, with God. The ten tribes were lost forever, swallowed up in the people who took them away. They lost their identity in the world they lived in. It can happen to us, even if we stay right here at home. Let us look at the obituary of a dead nation, and see what lessons it has for us. This passage is a brief sermon in the priestly tradition, in the Deuteronomic faith, of the certain judgment that awaits those people whose memories are short, and whose behavior is immoral, and who know no need to beg forgiveness and have their sins covered and forgotten in the mercies of God. To the writers who edited and preserved these words, this was an opportunity they could not miss to point up the meaning of history. The northern tribes were taken away and lost, not because they followed an imprudent foreign policy, or because they were a very small state in a world of ferocious empires. No, this was so, because the people of Isr had sinned against the Lord, the Lord who had proved his lovingkindness in bringing them up out of slavery and to this good land, and who had conquered for them the inhabitants of that land. The last clause of v.8 is so garbled in the original that no reading can make any sense of it. But it is not the distorted text that gives us pause; it is instead the clear meaning of the words themselves. There is an old story, and it would be a better one if I could remember who said it, of someone who was asked if he was bothered by those parts of the Bible which he could not understand. No, he replied, I'm bothered by the parts that I do understand. For 2500 yrs people have bet their lives upon the God who is revealed in this book, and it is not the distorted lines that matter to them, but rather the ones that come through loud and clear. The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want; God was in Xr, reconciling the world unto himself; in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. People who insist upon an inerrancy, and spend their time defending the broken texts and the obscure passages, miss the point of the Bible revelation. But then comes the indictment, v.9. They did secretly against the Lord things that were not right. There is no indication here as to why they had to act secretly, for there was nothing secret about the way they behaved. It is all but certain that here we have another torn text. It is certain that they did great wrongs against God and man. They built for themselves high places, which means that they put up altars to the local fertility and rain-cloud gods, from watchtower to fortified city. That is a colloquial expression meaning from the borders of the country right up to the capital city. Watchtowers were set up/out in the boondocks, away from settlements. They put up idols and Asherim, and they burned incense to false gods--asherim means images, idols, as KJV shows. And yet, in all of that, they had full warning that it was wrong. v.13 is the reminder. If any person take another god, adopt a temporal goal and make it ultimate, store up treasure in material goods and take no thought of other people, or of tomorrow, they have broken the first and most serious of the 10 commandments. What we put at the head of the page of our lives determines what we write in all the rest of the outline. The sin is in the doing, and it is also in scorning, making light of the commandments. They were stubborn, they hardened their necks, they did not believe in God. Note the double meaning of those words. To believe in God is one thing, maybe even an obvious thing. As Voltaire said, if there were no god, we would have to invent one, to remain sane. Where did it all come from? But these words mean something quite different, much deeper, and that is, to believe that God is present, that God is love and also judgment, that God means exactly what this book says that he said. They went after false idols, and became false^{vis}--there is a lesson in that: we become what we value, we become what we seek in life. v.15 is the centerpiece: they despised God's laws, and his covenant that he made with their fathers. They forsook the commandments, as though they had been repealed, or had no weight, or were old outmoded rules that no longer applied. Therefore the Lord was angry, and removed them out of his sight. No flood this time; the pagan host of Assyria served as the executioners of God's will upon his own people. The God of love kept his word, when people did not keep their word. Now, there are some things in this we need to note. One is that in every generation there are parallels with the behavior of those proud and headstrong people. In the age in which we live the evidence is not hard to find. Sexual immorality has become the norm rather than the exception, violent crimes threaten every citizen in every neighborhood, a high pct of the cars we meet on the hwy are driven by people who are floating high on some kind of artificial stimulant. The springs of govt are spotted w/corruption and bad judgment, civil rights are so far from fulfillment that there are lawsuits pending to protect them, the public will to pay for the costs of govt has dried up in a vast desert of debt. We are a people under judgment, and we need to humble ourselves and return to the God of our fathers whose almighty hand brought us to this place and this time. Then will the grace of God pour forth upon us in a healing balm, and humanity's heart shall be mended, and the relationship restored. That is promise of covenant God.

11-9-86. Sou KgdM Destroyed. The world in which we live ^{beginning w/} is in a predicament of our own making. On one side we have come to assume that man's reason, [↑] and man's doubt of the axioms of an earlier age, can solve all our problems, make life easier, and spread joy to all human beings. But on the other side we suffer from social maladjustments of all kinds, and from the explosive effects of man's reason//we live in fear: Arms reduction talks produce little beyond repeated mis-statements from our leaders//about what they offered to discuss in Iceland. In a recent issue of the magazine Xn Cntr there is an article by editor Jas M. Wall calling for hope in the face of unsolvable probs. Two fingers on two buttons that would send doomsday hurtling thru the skies at the other, in a world divided by strong polit ideologies//is a problem that all the reason we can bring to bear cannot solve. But there is the modern faith that by the use of reason we can solve every problem that we face. He quoted Michael Polanyi: "the past 4 or 5 cns, which have gradually destroyed or overshadowed the whole medieval cosmos, have enriched us mentally and morally to an extent unrivalled by any period of similar duration. But its incandescence has fed on the combustion of the Xn heritage in the oxygen of Grk rationalism, and when the fuel was exhausted, the crifical framework itself burned away." If the problem were bridging a chasm, or finding a vaccine, or building a better rocket engine, then reason stands supreme. But when the probl becomes a rebellious teen-ager, or a 12-year old unwed mother, or an itchy finger on the nuclear button, then reason stands helpless. Reason cannot understand what Blaise Pascal understood 3 cns ago--that reason's last function is to confess that most of the things that hurt us are not susceptible to solution by reason. For the ills of mankind that really matter, that mean the difference between peace and obliteration, and betw a strong family and self-willed rebellion, or perhaps even between national security and an incredible budget deficit that saps the very strength it was expected to support, for the kind of sickness we all suffer, it is the Hebr-Xn proclamat that our hope is in trust in God. // Considering the fine mess that our atom-splitting has gotten us into, Wall concluded, it would make reasonable sense now to consider a return to a trust in the Creator who made the atom in the first place. // In the sad event we have as the basis for today's lesson there is ample ground for such a faith. // Text 2 Kgs 24-5. We are in the closing wks of a qr's series of lessons on Bibl history, the beginning of the covenant people. The faith of the Jews, and of those of us who inherit their God, their law, and their messianic promise, has its taproot in the belief that God made a special agreement, or covenant, with Abraham. If he acted in faith to go where he did not know, then God would make of his descendants a chosen people who would be protected and blessed so long as they folwd God's comdmts, and had no other god before Him. One strong factor in the relig thought of the Jews was the ethical element it contained. If one of us would invent a god it might very well be nothing more than the extension of our own egos, promising us popularity and good health and long life, and the assurance that anything we want to do is morally acceptable. There would be no sin, would there? and no judgmt other than our own, and no punishment. Isn't it suggestive that the people who live that way, and we all know somebody who does--and for some of us it is ourselves--the people we know who live that way have no more happiness, or joy, or peace of mind, than any other whose god is self. But in the relig of the Jews there is a strong demand for personal purity, for integrity in all things, and for justice to the weak and defenceless. And there is also the promise of God's presence if they keep the commandmts, and the equally-certain promise of punishmt if they were guided by their own reasons in measuring their lives. The Jews put God in history, not in some dim distant past, in a time long gone, but in their present, in all that happened to them. Happiness came to the faithful, the prophets taught, but misfortune was the intervention of God in history to punish. Nations rise and fall, the captains and the kings depart, but the Lord God of Hosts is with us still, lest we forget. In that God-centered view of history there were two turning point events. One was the passover and the escape from slavery in Egy, folwd by the giving of the law on the sacred mountain. The other was the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, which the prophets saw in divine terms as the power of God to use a heathen army as the scourge of punishmt, of God's own chosen, covenant people. Today, and in the 2 Sundays to come, we shall read and think about that second, disastrous intrusion of God in history, and what it means to us. 2 Kgs 24: 18-25: 1-9. You might not guess, from the dry, impersonal description we find here, that we are reading of human tragedy, and of the death agony of the ancient Davidic line of kings in Jerus. You might also miss, from the official language of the report, that it concerns the ancestors and the political state of the writers and editors. The details of the tragic march of folly are not what interested these writers. In one sentence, in 8 words in my translat, the rebellion of Zedekiah was mentioned, and then put aside. // In time we are about 130 yrs after the capture and disappearance of the nor KgdM of Isr, yrs in which people folwd their reasons instead of their commitments, yrs in which the prophets constantly criticised the falling away from obedience and the path of righteousness. They begged, they pleaded, they spoke in parables, they preached. But their message went unheeded. People knew better than some grey-bearded grouches who were kill-joys, who spoke of duties in a world where pleasure was king, who called people to return to God, people who

saw life as a beach party, who saw the Sabbath as a day to sleep late, who laughed at those who warned of punishment to come. And the punishment was, in the mercy of God, delayed. 130 yrs is a long, long time, perhaps too long for us to live with. Each day without anatomic attack is that much gained, isn't it? Another month, another year, without judgment upon us. Surely that means we can continue in our easy ways. Rebellion is more exciting than obedience. But then comes the pay day. God does not close his books in so brief a moment as a century. The years teach us much that the hours cannot know, said R.W. Emerson. To see the present in the light of God's calendar is to understand the folly of continued refusal to be obedient and to follow after righteousness. But who, would you guess, shall have the last word? Shall it be natl pride or natl humiliation? The one will insure the other; that is the message of the prophet Jeremiah. People ignored it. They could solve their own problems. They were reasonable creatures, who had built a glorious palace and temple and city, who were wealthy as the world counted wealth, who every year wrested food from an uncooperative earth. With all that, surely they could master the threat to their security. They could enter into alliances that would insure them against all evil. There, nearby, were the Egys, descendants of the same people who had compelled their labor and held them to captivity. Now they would send troops to defend Judah against the rising fury of Babylon. It made young king Zedekiah arrogant and foolish. Thinking himself in command, he rebelled against the king of Babylon. Here it is a pity that our records are arranged by author instead of by chronology, for we need to read of Zedekiah's folly in Jeremiah, who was prophet in those years of headstrong stupidity. Jer 37 & following tell of the prophet's earnest effort to beat some sense into the heads of people, and of his failure. Zedekiah ignored the advice of the prophet, and broke the promise he had made to the Babyl king. He rebelled. To the ancients, as to many moderns, that was an unforgivable act of perfidy that could only be punished brutally and finally. In stark and unadorned language we read of the horror that followed. For 18 months the Babyls besieged Jerus. They could afford to wait, for they had time and famine on their side. When all food and water were gone, so that people were no longer capable of defense, the wall was broken, the city entered. Then came the retribution. It is not a pretty sight, but just for a few minutes we need to look upon it, long and hard and unblinking. It has something to say to us that we need to hear. We too are a people of pride in our achievements. Our wealth is the envy of the world, when millions are undernourished and afflicted with disease. Somewhere I read that every day 40,000 people in the world die from famine and related illness. Our military budgets would feed and clothe and educate the multitude, the waste from our tables would keep children alive if we could but deliver it. But more than that is the relig condition in the land. According to the Bibl story//there were only two people, the parents of us all, and they lived in a garden in which all their needs were bountifully met. Still, they refused, and rebelled. The original sin was their willingness to agree with the suspicion that God was not to be trusted. Only one thing was forbidden them, and that one thing they did, because they wanted to see for themselves what God had hidden from them. Invited to trust the providence of God, they stepped over the boundaries God had set. Faith, the gift of an assured truth upon which we can all rely for our well-being, was replaced by doubt. Now, doubt has its attractive qualities. Someone has defined history as the 5 thousand year rear-guard action of dogma against the attack of curiosity. Doubt of the axioms has made possible scientific and technological advances beyond the imagination of times past. There is a book in the library about what people in the past thought of the future--what people who lived before us, imagined that our own time would be like. It is instructive to read the utopias of the past, for never did they correctly envision our lives, the gadgets we take for granted, the pills that banish our pains.//But for all that, we need to understand also that doubt taken to rebellion is destructive of our relationship with the God who made us, and who made the garden planet in which we live. The same doubt that produced unbelievable intellectual advances, which is the foundation for scientific truth, has led to a loss of trust in God. In that we are at risk, for however often we replace holy water with an antiseptic, or place our trust in heavy bombers, or stock certificates, the future still is in the hands of God. The poet has shouted it: while nations rage, while empires rock & fall, While hatred burns, and greed and war increase, With heart & voice we dedicate our all Once more to Thee, Oh mighty Prince of Peace.// That we know it, and do it not, is our grievous fault, and it is to us that punishment comes. It came to the chosen people; can we thank ourselves more dear to God than they were, more secure in forgiveness, when we continue to reject the truth? For the truth in these words comes clearly to us: for the kinds of problems we face, there is no solution as the world and reason see solutions. We cannot discover a vaccine for human rebellion, nor a cure for the folly of going it our way, when the way of trust is open before us. To those who are the people of faith there is a continuing obligation to trust in God and not the computer, and there is a continuing obligation to offer to our friends and neighbors an alternative to the treasures where moth & rust corrupt, and thieves break in and steal. A nation's life does not consist of the multitude of nuclear war-heads it possesses. The covenant is for keeping, and in the keeping of it we live, and move, and have our being. No other way can offer that blessed assurance.

11-16-86. Promise of Return. Very few of us have any understanding of what it means to be separated from one's native land and cut off from one's roots. Not so very long ago it was a common occurrence for millions of people to leave their homes and migrate to the United States. Every yr some of them became so homesick that they made their way back home to live. It may be poorer, but there is something enriching about home cooking and ~~lifestyles~~. So dearly defended a thing is a person's connection to his native land that forcible separation from it, what we call exile, has from earliest times been employed as a form of punishment. In ancient Athens the republic settled policy disputes by a process of ostracism, by which a person was voted into honorable exile for 10 yrs, with no loss of property or citizenship. Tully Cicero wrote his best ltrs and essays while in exile from Rome. What may be more familiar to us is the largely fictitious short-story about Philip Nolan, published in 1863 under the title, the man w/o a country. Edward Everett Hale wrote what some consider one of the best short stories written by an American, about a young man who shouted in a military court martial that he hated the U.S. and wished he would never again hear of the U.S. again. The presiding judge gave him his wish. He was condemned to live the rest of his life on board U.S. naval vessels, on long voyages, and never again set foot upon his native soil. It was not long before he regretted his hasty words, and as the years passed, his love of country increased. He bore the marks of his punishment, the author wrote, as if he had been beaten with a lash. Exile, and the promise of return, is the subject of today's lesson, text Zechariah 8. Zech is next-to-last bk in OT, a book in 2 parts. Chs 1-8 are undoubtedly the work of the prophet who was one of the first to return from captivity, and who wrote in the brief period from 520 to 518. Chaps 9-14 are troublesome, in text and meaning and context, for they are visionary, in the apocalyptic style, and may represent a later age. Our assignment is from chap 8, so we need not deal w/the vexing probs of the latter chaps. Zechariah means God remembers. His very name is a statement of faith, one we should ourselves remember. His work is dated in the text, so we know when it was written. It began in the 8th month, 520, another part was added on 24th day, 11th month, 520 (1:7). The passage we have is dated 4th day, 9th month, 518 (7:1). Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai, and with him is considered a founder of Judaism, and some say, of the narrowly limited view of the people of God that became the norm after the exile. His book is a series of sayings about the rebuilding of the temple, and about the coming messianic age for which all his people must prepare themselves. All through the book there is evidence of discouragement and a sense of hopelessness. Cyrus the king of Persia conq Babylonia in 539, and soon thereafter began a policy of returning to their homelands the exiles taken to Babylon as hostages. Two yrs later the child Zechariah had been taken back to Jerus w/his family. Now, 17 yrs later, a man in years and insight, ~~he~~ began his prophetic mission. One who made a study of the function of prophet said the assignment was ~~the~~ to quiet the people's fears about the state of the world, to inspire their zeal and encourage their perseverance, to give them confidence, and to remind them that God cares about them and that their sins are forgiven. Every generation, every decade, every year, needs the prophet, for it is not easy to maintain enthusiasm when we lose more often than we win, and fail more often than we succeed. William the Silent, stadtholder of the Netherlands, is the hero of perseverance. His life was a tragic struggle against overpowering circumstances, prospects so gloomy that most of us would have given up and moved away. His description of his life has a nobility about it that we cannot repeat too often--it is not necessary to hope in order to act, or to succeed in order to persevere. Still, the unrealized hope is the chokechain that cuts the windpipe of our dreams; the constant ambush of ambition by cynicism and despair takes away our dignity. The promise of Cyrus to the captive peoples was a false dawn, followed by more of the night that covers us, black as the pit from pole to pole. Most of the exiles remained in Babylon, and these who returned found conditions harsh and disheartening. To that discouragement spoke first the prophet Haggai and then Zechariah with words of comfort and hope. Zech 8: 3-13. This is part of Zech's reply to questions put to him in Chap 7 from the people of the ancient shrine of Beth-el, asking whether they should continue to keep the fast in the fifth month of the year, as they had while in Exile. The first part of the reply spoke directly to the question; the second part broadened the context. There are 7 sayings in it, each beginning w/words, Thus saith the Lord of Hosts. All of them promise future happiness to the city of Jerus and to the land of Judah. It is the picture of a restored society, in which every part of the community will have a share in the joy that is to come. Standing in the middle of rubble and broken building stones that marked the desolation of the city's destruction, the prophet could see the rebuilt city that the future held. Thus says the Lord God of hosts, I will return, and will dwell in the midst. The idea of the return is basic to Hebrew thought, and it means man's repentance and return to God, it means man's recognition that he has departed from the covenant, and that he must arise and return to the Father. The faith of Isr is that any person can at any time return in humble penitence and God will accept and forgive.. On the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, in synagogues all the world over, a portion of Chap 3 of the Bk of Jonah is read to the congregat. Jonah grieved out, Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown, and the King called on his people

to return, every person, from his/her evil way. Who knows, God may repent, and turn from his plan of destruction. No other evidence is needed; when God saw what they did, how they returned from their evil way, God repented of the evil that he had said he would do to them and did it not. Here Zechariah heard the word of the Lord, saying, I will return, making the point that when we stray from the presence of God, God will himself reach out to us and make the connection which we have let become untied. And look at the change in the place. Jerus shall be called the faithful city and the mountain of Zion shall be called the holy mountain. The 3d saying is vv 4-5, and it presents a picture of peaceful happiness we would not think of ourselves. The elderly shall sit in the streets, and the streets shall be filled with children at play. What a picture of an ideal future that is. If we were to describe the significant achievements of our city we might mention the value of its trade, or the number of its population, the quality of its symphony or opera company, or the spiritual inspiration the audience gets from its little theatre playhouse. How many of us would point to park benches where the elderly can come to sit in the thin November sunlight, and talk to each other, and play a game of checkers? Or would we think it important to tell of the playgrounds for the children? Zechariah wants us to measure the effect of God's return to the faithful city and to the holy mountain by the way the old and the young find contentment. It is of some significance that elderly people sitting along the street are evidence of the presence of God in the world, and the play of children in the streets and in the parks is also a sign of the peace that God offers. I would guess that there are very few people in these days who would look with disfavor upon the happy play of children, but in the past it was common. Dickens' stories contain a few killjoys who would regiment children and compel them to squeeze out of their beings the fun of play. What is chilling is that people who demand the recognition that life is real, life is earnest, and is too serious to be frittered away with tag and I spy and London bridge, did so, and may yet do so, out of a distorted religious sense. But here is a picture of a city that is acting like a city should act. In the market-place where people buy what they need to live there is a hurry and a bustle. There is also, often, the attitude that unless a person is useful to the business of buying and selling he is a nuisance, a burden, and weight around the necks of the wage-earners. Brush them away. Repeal social security, and aid to dependent children, and lunch programs and recreation departments; regard aging as a thing to hide and not to honor, exploit the very young with pornography and unimaginative toys and right-to-life dolls. When God returns to the city, the elderly will be given seats along the street, and the young will play. And how fares the church and temple in the matter of the two ends of the birthday spectrum? Are there children who are not given opportunity to learn the old stories, and psalms? and the lessons in speaking and praying and the doctrines? And the elderly; do we forget that they are people too, that they are children of God, that they need much, and have much to offer? City streets safe for retired people, and for those who have not yet begun to give of their talents, is the sign of God's return. By that measure, how near, or how far, are we from the faithful city and the holy mountain? The fifth saying is vv. 7-8, and it is the renewal of the covenant that was broken. People who fled to Egypt, and those who were carried away into Babylon, shall return; they shall be my people I will be their God. These are the ancient words of covenant; they are as old as Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob who was Israel. People may forget the covenant, and ~~we~~ break it, thinking we are adults, and sophisticates, and upwardly mobile, and no longer need it. Keep the sabbath, honor father and mother, have no other gods, do not covet, they are all old-fashioned, obsolete. People may forget, or think they outgrow, but God never forgets. The same offer is made to us that was made to the patriarchs of old. How shall we respond? The 6th saying is in vv. 9-13. It is a promise of mercy and peace. Let your hands be strong, to build the temple of God in the holy mountain, for it will be the messianic sign. Emmanuel, God with us, will be our motto when the temple is completed. When God is with us, there shall be a sowing of peace and plenty. Gardens shall grow luxuriantly and yield large harvests of the fruits and grains that we enjoy; the rains will come and we need take no thought of the morrow, for all is prepared for you. And as in the past you have been the joke of the world, for you forgot God and were punished for it, now you shall be a blessing to all the world. Fear not, but let your hands be strong. This is the word of comfort and hope to a people who needed to hear it. What it says is that the dark night of the soul is but the preparation for the dawn. There is a modern parable about the first man, called Adam, Man, and how he must have felt when in the evening the sun went down and the sky grew dark. It was Adam's first darkness. He could not know, that it was natural, and normal, for he had never seen night, or felt dawn upon his brow. Then he must have seen that the dark is not dark; there are stars, with their promise of the sun, for stars are suns just as our sun is a star, the returning star of the day. That night Adam learned that the night is never wholly dark, and no night is endless. Each of us must learn it in our own time of trouble and darkness. The light is never far. That is the msg of Zechariah, to his own time, and also to us.

Rejoice in law

Neh 8:1-3

Psa 119:105-12

11-23-86. Rebuilding. It is a perennial indoor sport of the learned population to decry the current state of history writing. Gifted minds and inspired pens are rare combinations in any generation, and are particularly embarrassing by their shortage in a day of managerial history and bureaucratic projects and the processing rather than the careful indicting of words. 160 yrs ago the sublime English historian Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote a justly celebrated essay upon the writings of Henry Hallam. History, at least in its state of ideal perfection, Macaulay wrote, is a compound of poetry and philosophy. It impresses general truths on the mind by a vivid representation of particular characters and incidents." And then he wrote a magisterial sentence describing what history in its ideal perfection ought to contain and do: To make the past present, to bring the distant near, to place us in the society of a greatman or on the eminence which overlooks the field of a mighty battle, to invest with the reality of human flesh and blood//beings whom we are too much inclined to consider as personified qualities in an allegory, to call up our ancestors before us with all their peculiarities of language, manners, and garb, to show us over their houses, to seat us at their tables, to rummage their old-fashioned wardrobes, to explain the uses of their ponderous furniture--this is the task and function of history. That being the case, now you can understand why all students of history from that time to this read Macaulay with profit and delight. Macaulay's vivid imagination entrances us by giving life to the dead, and meaning to the departed, by recreating those beings both great and small who transmitted to us the world and the language and the community which we call our own. Today we are going to look at a tiny event in the past, to examine it for life and meaning in our own day, text Ezra and Nehemiah. This is the last but one of a series of lessons we have considered this fall on the history of the covenant people. We have not always obeyed Thomas Macaulay's rule about the work of history, but we have watched a people, no different in any discernable feature from ourselves, except that they knew themselves to be the elect of God a bit earlier than we came to understand that of ourselves, and that they bequeathed to us the awareness of the presence of a God of judgment and of love, who created and legislated a world in which they and we might live in peace and in happiness if we but cling unflinchingly to the knowledge that we are creatures, and dependent upon the almighty spirit who made us in his image, but who will surely suffer the consequences if we forget and deny our creaturehood and our need. The lesson of scripture is clear--joy unlimited goes with faith and obedience to a moral law, for this is at base a moral universe and we are ourselves created for a moral existence. But just as inexorably the rule is clear--punishment follows disobedience and sensuality and perversion of the good life. Sins of the flesh are punished in the flesh, sins of the spirit are punished in the spirit, sins of the mind result in the darkening of the mind. Hell is anywhere that God is not, and that means here and now when mankind imagines himself beyond the restraints of the moral law. Those original chosen people got to that point, but we should not judge too harshly, for it is a continuing temptation to all of us, and none of us is so intent upon the spirit and so forgetful of the flesh that we can think ourselves beyond danger. They got to that point; the one kgdm of Israel split into two small states, which in a world of powerful and expansive empires were at risk of destruction. The prophets pleaded with rulers and priests and people to put their trust in the God of hosts--thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee; trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock--but in their wisdom they collected weapons, and entered into alliances, and walked in their own way. It led to the disappearance of the 10 tribes of the North, and to the defeat and captivity in Babylon of the remaining kgdm of Judea. But as Adam learned, on the night of the first day of his existence, as the parable of the rabbis had it, No night is forever. Dawn comes. God is merciful as well as just, and his forgiveness is swift and total to the penitent. After the fall of Jerusalem, Palestine was a part of the Babyl empire, (for nearly half-a-century) //until 539 when Cyrus the Persian emperor captured the city without a battle. The ancients told with some glee a pretty story about how he came alone into the city of Babylon and bribed the guards to show him how to take the city, which was considered to be absolutely fail safe--somebody said that to call something foolproof is to underestimate the ingenuity of fools--and then returned with his army to capture it without a single casualty--one skinned knee, perhaps, but nothing serious. Cyrus may teach us all a lesson in what kind of nuclear weapons and space defenses we put our trust in. He was an unlightened young man who knew that Babylon was past the stage of ripe and already in the category of rotten. It is a wise leader who knows that of his enemy; it is an even wiser leader who knows that of his own people, and moves to cut away the rotten and make ripe the rest. He also knew, when Persia came to dominate the world, that his administration would be strong only if its subject peoples were strong and rich and happy. He also knew that part of their contentment came from being permitted to worship as they pleased, Gods of their own choosing. So Cyrus issued a decree that all those displaced persons, carried into exile by the harsh Babyl rule, would be permitted to return to their homelands. He also announced his policy of allowing them to take back with them their gods who had been uprooted from their rightful places. Pagans imagine gods to have their places, and to know their

(same)
place. But let us read the record as we have it, and then think about it. Ezra 1: 1-4; 6: 11-16; Nehemiah 4: 15; 6: 15-16. First you will note that we have read only the briefest of tidbits from the whole story. Let us all take it as assignmt to read Ezra/Nehemiah, and along with them the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, for they were contemporaries, all of them. There is good evidence that when first written, 5th cen b.c., the bks of Ezra/Nehemiah were all one book, and that they were written by the ~~Chronicles~~ ^{Chronicler} who put in present form the bks we call first & second chronicles. If you compare the end of 2 Chrons with the beginning of Ezra, you will see the repetition that tied the one part of the history to another. In fact, the final sentence of Chron, which is incomplete, is completed in Ezra. Two other books named Ezra, or Esdras, have come down to us from the past, but are not admitted to the canon as we follow it. They are revisions, or editings, of these present canonical books, and you may compare the two versions. But first we have Cyrus' proclamation. The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. In Chap 6 there is a repetition of this proclamat, but in the original it is in Aramaic rather than Hebr, as it is here. Aramaic was a related dialect to Hebrew, and was spoken farther east; it rivalled Hebrew for public expression after the return from exile. There is an inscription found in the ruins of Ur of the Chaldees, the city from which Abraham came, an inscription of Cyrus, which says, The great gods have delivered all the lands into my hands. It is a statemt of the work of God in history. The tolerance of divergent religious views; even the encouragemt of them, is here described as adirect evidence of the working of God on the mind of a pagan. It is worth noting, in this age of moral majorities & minorities, and the pursuit of a civil religion by people who want to compel all people into their own mold. Would it not be fun if the secular humanists were to insist that one of them be commissioned a chaplain in the military, or that the chaplain in the U.S. Senate should be a Buddhist, or a Muslim, to show what happens when congress is given power to legislate upon religion? Cyrus, 2500 yrs ago, showed more understanding of political and religious confidence than do many in our own day. Fear that we may be wrong is the motive force behind efforts to compel conformity; fear that if there are alternative paths to the good life people will hurtle down the wrong one to their destruction. We who know that our God lives, will show it in the way we behave, and we will proclaim to all the world that a savior has come unto us, and we will speak to God about our brother, but we shall not exclude, or punish anyone who chooses to believe adogtrine that differs from our own. Cyrus was a non-believer, and yet he commanded the exiles to return to Jerus and rebuild the temple; he gave them the golden vessels that were in the temple, and he ggve them goods & beasts & an appropriation of money to finance the rebuilding. Isa 45 declares Cyrus to be God's anointed --in Hebr the word is Messiah, in the Grk it is the christ, which tells us that the word and the mission was understood differently by the people of the time. With Cyrus' encouragemt and assistance, Ch6 tells us that the elders prospered and built, and finished the work of restoring the temple. It took about 4 yrs and 6 months, in the 6th year of the reign of Darius, which on our calendar is 516 b.c. In the verses that follw we read that the temple was dedicated, and the pass-over celebrated, with great joy. The remainder of the readings assigned us tells of the construction of the wall about the city of Jerus. For that the Jews had no assistance from the Persians. In fact, they met opposition from their neighbors, who killed many masons as they fitted stones into the wall. The neighboring peoples wanted no wall about Jerus, for that would mean that the Jews could protect themselves, and defend themselves, and remain independent in their own right. Even with the rebuilt Temple, there could be no security without a wall. It was Nehemiah whogave ldrshp to build what had been broken. At night, so no enemy would attack, he conducted an inspection of the walls, and he made plans to rebuild. The ruler of Samaria violently opposed the work, as did the people of Edom and Ammon, lands east and south. They sent raiding parties to prevent the work. Nehemiah divided his force, half to build and half to stand guard. In 52 days the wall was completed, and the success was regarded as proof that God had helped in the work (6:16). We cannot in good conscience sit in judgmt upon those people, not we, who expend enormous sums to build walls about our homeland, but there is something sad about people taking pride in completing the wall, and then calling it proof of God's presence that struck fear into the surrounding peeples. There is something human about that, something temporary in the midst of the eternal, something of clay in the iron of faith. How far have we come in the history of the covenant people! Once they came into the promised land, and with the help of God, and the sounding of some ram's horn trumpets, blew down the walls people had built to defend themselves. Once they had defeated Philistine and Canaanite. Now they live huddled behind those walls, and consider it the sign of God's presence. History is a compound of poetry and philosophy, Macaulay wrote; it is a painted picture and it is a road map. Now, with the completion of a hundred yards or so of wall across the plateau, we are near the end of the road. One day there shall be a new Jerusalem, and there shall be no night there, and no wall, for the Lord God shall be all and all. Even as we live in this world, far from perfection, let us give thanks to the faint light we have, and pray for understanding and faith to see even more.

11-30-86. Law. There is an old proverb that says that nobody loves the law when the noose tightens around one's neck. The corollary to that is that everybody loves the law when it gives us permission to do as we please, with no punishments and no regrets. Which is to say that many of us do not like restraints and limits. That is what a law is. Whatever you and I may wish to do, whatever we may think the visibility or the safety conditions are, we cannot drive more than 35mph on the streets of our town, most of them, that is. Whatever we may decide about the right to own property, we cannot take for our use something that another person earned with time and mind and skill. Law must take precedence over our own wishes, and desires, because law is what we owe the community. It is the way we order a society composed of many people, of different concerns and interests, some of whose noses get in the way of another's clenched fist. And as we shall see, it is also the foundation of the covenant that God offered to create between himself and his people. Text Nehemiah 8, Psa 119. Today we come to the end of the month, and the final lesson in a series we have been doing this fall on the history of the covenant people. Covenant is the Bibl term for contract, or compact, or legal agreement, between God and man. It is a basic assertion of the Bibl revelation that God approaches mankind, not the other way around; that God offers the gift of his presence to those who accept the terms God imposes; that the terms take the form of a covenant. From the beginning of the encounter, the formula was the same; I will be your God, and you will be my people. The creation itself is a covenant in physical reality, according to the Bible; the rainbow that glows in the stormcloud when the sun breaks through upon it, is another covenant, a promise from God--never again shall all mankind be destroyed by flood. Only the family of Noah was saved in the ark. Then came the call of God to Abram, in far-off Chaldea, to rise up and go, taking on trust the promise of protection and guidance. The descendants of Abram were the chosen people, whether they liked it or not; there have always been some among them, and us, who resent and reject and refuse the honor. It costs to be chosen. It may be the jealousy of the less-favored, or the human resentment of the holy, that at one epoch or another in human history the hands of the nations are raised against hapless Israel. The wandering Jew, seeking a homeland, and a way to make his bread, and raise his children, is a judgment upon the whole world. That Jews remain steadfast in their faith is a tribute to their indomitable will. It also costs to preserve the ancient scrolls of the law. Some time ago I visited the state art gallery in Raleigh, and saw the room with the treasures from the Jewish art tradition. If you've not seen it, you are missing a moving experience. At the center of the room, at the focus ~~the~~ of the exhibit, there is an elaborately decorated silver container with a scroll of the law inside it. The container is partially opened, so the viewer can see the rich vellum and the beautiful Hebrew calligraphy. Tears came into my eyes when I saw it, for in that display case I could see nearly 3000 years, and millions of people who died in faith, who died cherishing and defending the words upon that scroll. It costs to be chosen. The choice is ours, but the invitation is God's. It is to all people, for the Hebr mission is to bring the whole world to the knowld of the one true God. And at the heart of the Hebr faith is the doctrine of law. What we need to remember about the law of God is that it was not a burden, it was not a cost, it was a great blessing. It was the gift of God to his people, for it gave mankind instructions in happy and prosperous living from the manufacturer, the one who made us. It was an act of grace, unmerited grace, on man's part, that God gave the law. It is therefore a thing in which we find and take delight and joy. So it was to the people who returned to Jerusalem from exile, when the law was read to them in the restored city. Neh 8: 1-8. This is a scene of triumph and joy, rich in emotion and human dignity. The text has some difficulty. At this point in the story Nehemiah is no longer the central figure; Ezra is. Some say this passage belongs after Chap 8 of Ezra, as it does in the oldest Grk--not Hebr--translat we have. Others say that since the book was not opened until v.5, we should omit the line in v.3 that says Ezra began to read. Others speculate about what the reading might have been. But these are minor matters, in light of the scene itself. Picture it in your own mind. There is an open square somewhere in the city, near the gate through which the water-bearers entered. It is thronged with people, jam-packed, and overflowing into the narrow streets that lead into the square. A wooden speakers' stand has been built for the occasion; it enables the speaker to stand above the heads of the crowd so all can see and hear. The people are sitting on the stones of the square. It is early morning. The sun has just begun to rise over the mount of olives on the eastern side of the city. On the pulpit we see the prophet Ezra, and on either side of him stand men, six on one side, seven on the other. Ezra did not so much open the book as he began to unroll a scroll, rolling the narrow strip of paper from one roller to another so that the text could be read. And when he opened it the people stood. There is a library of meaning in that phrase. It was a sign of respect in the oriental tradition; it was a recognition that the scroll, and the words written upon it, were important, not in themselves, but in what they represented. I do not know what passage he read, and it does not matter what he read. What matters is that the scroll represented the religious experience of the nation of Israel. It was the record of their encounter with God, with the God who invited all

✓✓ best way ancients could make a book -
Tape cassette - forward into the past.

mankind into covenant with him. It was a reminder that Israel was the nation of priests, the bearers of the promise made to Abraham, that his descendants would become a great nation, and thru that nation all the families of earth would find a blessing. That scroll, in itself, spoke clearly to all who looked upon it. It said: God is, that is a simple fact so obvious that it does not bear debate. We take it as given, and we give thanks for it. Thank you God, for being God, for being so far beyond human understanding and human limitations, and human quarrels and angers and feuds and terrorist bombings and arms shipments to a terrorist nation and stock market deals that rob the investor, and petty immoralities, and all the problems we think important. God is far beyond us, but still is with us, with tender love and care as the shepherd cares for the tenderest lamb. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. The Lord is my helper, an ever-present help in trouble. Go to Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth, and I will be with you to the end of the age. To the end of time, and space, and life, God will go with us, to comfort and succor us. There is also in this scene of a great crowd of people standing as the law was read to them, a sense of guilt and repentance for wrongs done, and rights undone. In this is the universal appeal of religion in every age and land. When those people understood the meaning of the law, and heard it from the source, they felt the judgment of God upon them. Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God--an expression, incidentally, which is rare in Hebr, though common among the Babylonians--and all the people said Amen, amen. They bowed their heads to the ground, and they worshipped God. They wept when they heard the word of God to them, but it was weeping out of sorrow at moral failure. It was sadness that was joy, for it brought forgiveness and a feeling of being clean and whole again. That is the source of joy in the law. That God would care enough for us to draw the lines around safe behavior is an act of God's grace. Last wk, in the newspaper, there was a story about the doctor whose advice helped or hindered the raising from infancy to adulthood of the present generation of the upwardly mobile. Dr. Spöck said that children know when they have misbehaved, and if they are not corrected, they behave worse and worse, as if they were saying, how bad do I have to be before anybody cares? Adults, too, know when they do wrong, and look for the limits that say, I care for you. Thomas Szasz, a child psychologist, wrote that permissiveness is the principle of treating children as if they were adult, and the tactic of guaranteeing that they never reach that stage. The doctor is saying that without restraints we cannot attain adulthood and maturity. From that idea of ourselves we can begin to understand the rejoicing in the law. It is the will of God for his people, it is commanded of us, but more than that, it is an explanation of our own nature. We were made for the moral freedom that comes when we obey the divine law that is set before us, for then we can be fully human. So we do not hate the law; we rejoice in it. It is not a burden; it is a blessing. One night we were walking in a new section of Venice, which is as you know a city of small canals and waterways. A streetlight was not burning, so we could not see that the street ended without a guardrail, and a tiny arm of the lagoon lay before us. But there was a white painted line along the edge of the walkway. We saw it, and we stopped in time to avoid a drenching. That dim white line made a difference to us. It also limited our freedom to walk right into the Adriatic Sea. Like the law of fidelity in human relations, and honesty in our dealings, and setting apart a sabbath unto the Lord, and having no other Gods before the one God, that white line was painted in that street to guide us and keep us out of trouble. We were thankful for it. We saw no reason to question it, or vote against it, or decide that we had the right to obey it if we chose, or ignore it and go our own way. Nor did we think that in one situation we would accept its restraint, but in another we might just leap over it, into the drink. That is the way people regard the law of God in their lives. It is something that either saves us from destroying ourselves, or it does not matter unless we get caught. It is a lot of pointless rules that get in the way of a good time, or it is the word of God on the subject of how we were made and what is good for us, and what bad. Who better knows how to be deeply and fully happy in life than the maker who put us together? So we look to it not as something to avoid, or run around the end of, or cut out of our lives as obsolete. No, we give thanks to God for the gift of the law, as evidence of God's concern for us. A permissive God would treat us as masters of ourselves, and would remove the white painted lines at the end of the walkway in the cause of giving us freedom to find out for ourselves how wet and cold the water. A permissive God would employ the tactic of guaranteeing that we never reached the stage of moral maturity. So we do not regret, we rejoice, in the law. It is the foundation-stone of the covenant between God and man, and it is the measure of God's love for us that he gave it to us. Let us hear a portion of the Psalm 119, every one of whose 176 verses is a hymn in praise of the law. Psa 119: 105-112.

as we saw later,
grand gate left open -