

"Covenants"
The First Sunday in Lent
18 February 2024
Trinity+St.Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-9
I Peter 3:18-22
St. Mark 1:9-15

INI

An opening thought from the psalm for this day:

*Gracious and upright is the Lord,
Therefore God teaches the sinners in God's way.
God guides the humble in doing right.
And teaches God's way to the lowly
All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness.
To those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.*

There at the close of the psalm we are introduced to the notion of covenant. It is a theme that pervades both of the Testaments (a word that is a play on the idea of covenant, the Old Covenant, and the New Covenant). Just a quick moment to review the idea of covenant.

In Genesis 15 we have a startling image of a covenant between YHWH and Abraham which involved the cutting in half of a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. It explains the Hebrew usage; one didn't make a covenant, one cut a covenant. In classical usage, sacrificial animals were cut in half, and the two parties to the covenant passed between the offerings, sealing the covenant. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of covenants made between God and humankind, and humans with one another. Such agreements were either obligatory or promissory. Obligatory covenants were seen especially amongst the Hittites where the obligation was between people of an equal status. Promissory covenants are more common in the Hebrew Scriptures, made between a ruling type, or suzerain, and a vassal. Usually included in such covenants were blessings and curses that would accrue to the parties if the covenant was kept or not. There are usually witnesses as well. In the Bible, especially, both heaven and earth were called to witness the covenant. Such covenants were made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and with David. The whole notion of covenants, which was largely societal and political in nature, soon became a theological reality as well. So in our first reading we witness a covenant with Noah.

The Noah story involves so many images and symbols that will play out in later Salvation History. One, which I had never thought of is the notion of the remnant that are saved, the idea of which becomes a real theme in Isaiah. The Covenant that is made

with Noah, that is with universal humanity, comes, according to the Talmud, with seven obligations; 1) courts of justice, 2) refraining from blasphemy, 3) refraining from idolatry, 4) refraining from sexual promiscuity, 5) refraining from bloodshed, 6) refraining from robbery, and 7) refraining from eating meat cut from a living animal. The covenant here is not only between Noah (and humankind as well) but between YHWH and all of creation, including the animals. There is a universalism here that is not always recognized or observed. In order to see this covenant in its full context, it would be good to read the entire Noah story in Genesis 9. It is good to see that God looks beyond the remnant to see the totality of humankind as the object of God's love, grace and mercy. A covenant and promise are lived out among all people.

Peter introduces us to what are the results of the covenant that God cuts between his prophets and God's chosen people. The author of the second reading provides a meditation on suffering, appropriate to the time we are entering. The examples that are brought to mind are Jesus himself, and to anonymous souls, the "spirits in prison." We are reminded of the Noah story in this reading, especially of its connection with baptism – a baptism into the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The remnant is also mentioned here – the remnant that is saved in the Flood Story. The suffering of Jesus is seen as a suffering for us, in fulfillment of his own particular covenant with God. It is a ministry to those who have floundered, suffered, come under condemnation and have been redeemed. In the closing verse we see a Jesus who is exalted from his suffering and seated at the right hand of God. This reading invites us during this season of Lent to contemplate our own being raised up in Baptism to become a member of the family of God, and a partner in the covenant.

Finally in the Gospel we have Mark's brevity writ large. In this short reading we meet John the Baptist who baptizes Jesus, experience the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, and the beginning of the Galilean ministry and the essence of Jesus' message, "*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*" The initial words "*in those days*", or "*it came to pass*" remind us of how this remembrance of Mark is part and parcel of the entire story of Salvation, of the Covenant made so often in the Hebrew Scriptures. Fulfillment of the covenant is near. In the Baptism of Jesus our attention is drawn not to John or to the act of Baptism but rather to the vision that Jesus has, for it speaks with a loud voice. First, Jesus is one of us in this act, being baptized in repentance. But then there is a momentous event – heaven being "*torn apart*" and the vision of the Holy Spirit, and the Voice announcing what the situation really was: Son, beloved, I am pleased. This is the covenant realized.

What follows is something of an opposite: wilderness, forty days and nights, temptation, company with the wild beasts, and...angels! I always like Nikos Kazantzakis' vision in his book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. He sees the Spirit – as a dark being who drives Jesus into the wilderness to confront his calling and destiny. With an economy of words, Mark describes two tumultuous situations.

Mark signals to us the destiny that awaits Jesus. John is arrested, and Jesus goes to Galilee, gradually to make his way back to Jerusalem where he will be killed. That is because the "*time is fulfilled.*" The Kingdom of God has come near, and it will be our duty and privilege during this season of Lent to look for how that is being revealed to us. Perhaps there will be no heavens being torn apart, nor a loud commanding voice,

but there will be the Spirit. I wonder where she will drive us during the forty days, as we live through the covenant made with us.

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