

## **Covenants and God's Love**

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Lent 2  
Genesis 1;1-7, 15-16

I want to take some time this morning to look at our Genesis passage. There is a word in there that is very important to the Hebrew Scriptures and a word that is important to us today in our fractured and broken world. That word is covenant.

Covenant carries with it the concept of promise and agreement, but of a deeper type. Covenant implies more than just a contract. Covenant implies something that is built on a relationship as well as agreement. We can agree to run a vestry meeting according to Robert's Rules of Order, but a covenant is more than this. For example we have a Rule of Life for our vestry about how we relate to each other and our position on the vestry. Think in terms of the Baptismal Covenant.

At council last week as the bishop was speaking, he talked about how fractured and broken the relationships in our diocese was 10 years ago. They were so bad that we had to come together and adopt a set of norms on how to get along as a diocese and they were read aloud at every diocesan meeting for several years. This was the beginning of rebuilding the covenant of how we as a diocese were going to get along. Covenants take work to maintain especially for humans who are prone to making mistakes. This reminds me of one of our baptismal promises that says when you sin will you repent and return to the Lord and we answer "With God's help."

Covenants in the Bible however are a little different because the covenants I am referring to are between God and humanity. Yes we see many person to person covenants, but we also see the covenants between God and us. Today's Genesis passage is about a covenant relationship with God and Abraham, but it carries the promise of a covenant that goes to all of what will become Israel. There was one in last week's Genesis passage with Noah. These two represent the two types of covenants we see between God and humanity.

The two types of covenants in the Bible are Sinai and Zion. The difference is in what is promised and what if anything is exchanged or required. One type of covenant involves a quid pro quo. I do x and you do y and the covenant is kept. I give you commandments, you follow them and you get rewarded. That would be the Sinai covenant. The other is one sided and is always from God. This is the Zion covenant and is the basis for the covenant between God and King David (a descendent of Abraham) and through David to the entire Jewish people. In this covenant God promises to be their God no matter what. Nothing is required in return. Now that is not to say that living outside of the norms of Jewish law would not have consequences but it does say that the bad things that may happen are not punishment from God. They are rather the natural consequences of bad behavior!

Today's covenant is the second promise of a male heir to Abram now named Abraham. The first promise was 13 years ago and is described in chapter 15. Shortly after that promise Abram has a son with Hagar who is named Ishmael. This is God saying in effect, "Listen Abraham I promised you a son with Sarah and I meant it. He will be the father of a great nation." What is skipped in the middle of today's reading is the requirement from God that he be circumcised as a sign of the covenant. That makes this a Sinai covenant because something is required in return. However circumcision was not unusual at that time and this was to show that they were decedents of the people of this covenant.

The far older covenant with Noah was with not just the Jews, not just with humanity, but with all of creation and that is something very important. This is the promise of the rainbow and that God will never destroy the world. However there is nothing required of us or creation.

Sounds a great deal like the concept of grace. "God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills." This is God's gift to us, but it is up to us to decide whether we accept it or not. This is how God reaches out to us, shows God's great love for us.

Richard Rohr's meditations this week have all been on creation. He and many others say that creation is God's ultimate act of love. If you go back to the covenant with Noah after the flood, God makes that covenant not just with Noah and humanity, but with all of creation. We know and we hear that God is love and creation is the proof of that love, that covenant of God that we are his people forever and nothing can make God break that covenant. While nothing is required we are invited to respond by being in relationship with God.

Love is a *relational* word, and that relationship presumes duality, or twoness, "because," in the words of Valentin Tomberg (1900-1973), "love is inconceivable without the Lover and the Loved, without ME and YOU, without One and the Other." [3] In order for love to manifest, there must first be duality. . . . In the words of another Sufi maxim "You are the mirror in which God sees himself."

. . . As we begin orienting ourselves on the Wisdom road map, it is with the recognition that our manifest universe is not simply an "object" created by a God out of the effluence of [God's] love but *is that love itself*, made manifest in the only possible way that it can, in the dimensions of energy and form. The created realm is not an artifact but an instrument through which the divine life becomes perceptible to itself. It's the way the score gets transformed into the music.<sup>1</sup>

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<http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/78143EDA0CAC32BA2540EF23F30FEDED/BBC62F1EC1C6D196C68C6A341B5D209E>

Example of holding up a sheet of music and asking people what is this. They say music. No, it is a bunch of symbols. It only becomes music when you play or sing it. The words of the bible are just words on a page. They become God's message when we embrace them, live them, proclaim them. We are all created in God's image and likeness. Being created in God's image is a given, our call is to live into the likeness part and that is where the relationship with God comes in. That is how we make the music.

Tuesday night the vestry invited The Rev. Canon Charles Robinson to come to our meeting to do what is called a Mutual Ministry Review. This is something that the diocese strongly urges us to do periodically. He broke the review into three parts but said the really important part is about relationship. He said, "Love is work. Relationships are work." To that I add living into a covenant is work, but this is the basis from which everything that we do as a parish flows. We are defined as Christians by our Baptismal Covenant. You all acknowledged that with our mission and vision work. Think back to what you said were the strengths of St. Aidan's. Many of these were about St. Aidan's as a family. Many of our wishes were to grow and strengthen those relationships. Rev. Robinson told us that we are far ahead of many congregations in that we have recognized this, value it and want to build on it.

On March 11 we will have a congregational meeting between services. At that meeting we will update you on finances, the preserving our heritage program and the six areas that our mission and vision work are calling us to focus on. All this will be summed up in an Annual Report that will be distributed at that time. One of the six areas of focus is to build our small group ministries because these are all about relationship building.

I found it interesting that one of our strengths was Christian Formation. When we looked at all the things we do as a parish we assigned the many activities and ministries to the six areas. Guess where many of our Christian Formation activities ended up? We discovered that they were all really small group ministries. The strength of our Christian Formation is in the fact that they foster relationships, covenants. EfM, Spirituality Groups, Centering Prayer, Cursillo Grouping, the list is quite impressive.

Covenants are critical to the life and health of the church. We as humanity have lived in covenantal relationship with God for as long as we have recorded history. God is always there, always loving us, always encouraging us to live into that relationship that covenant with God and with each other. They are work and there are always places where we are called to build our relationships. Some of that work will ultimately be outside these walls in building relationships with our neighborhood and our city. For ultimately our mission is not inside these walls but outside these walls. We need to begin to reach out in more purposeful ways to bring that light of Christ into a very dark world. We can be a beacon to draw people in, but maybe we need to be a beacon to send the light out as well. Pray about how you might help shine our light outside these walls as the people of God.