

1st Sunday of Lent
March 1, 2009
St. John the Evangelist Parish
Deacon James J. Benjamin

Genesis 9: 8-15 Psalm 25 I Peter 3: 18-22 Mark 1: 12-15

The OT has many examples of covenants between God and his chosen people, the Jews.

Today I would like to reflect with you about this theme of God's covenant, and what that might mean for us at the beginning of another season of Lent.

You recall that God made a covenant with Abraham (then called Abram) that he would make of him a great nation, blessing those who blessed him and cursing those who cursed him, when Abram lead his people to the new land God would show him. This story is in Gen. 12.

Before giving the people the 10 Commandments God makes another covenant with Moses (found in Exod. chaps. 19 & 20): if they keep his law they shall be his special people, dearer than all others, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

From Gen. 9 comes the story we just heard, that of Noah and his covenant with God. The ark has arrived on dry land and God promises Noah no more floods to devastate the earth. Why does God do this? Of course it is because of God's love and mercy for his people, but it is also, I think, because Noah had made an altar and offered pleasing sacrifices of thanksgiving to God after his rescue.

God is always willing, it seems, to make a new deal with the Jewish people, but their side of the bargain is to honor and worship God and keep his commandments. They always fall short, always "miss the mark;" in other words, sinfulness always seems to win out and people forget their obligations to their God.

It would be no different this time; in fact, only two short chapters later human beings create the famous tower of Babel. God is not pleased because he knows that people will go on to do whatever their technology allows them to do, ignoring his law in their attempts to make themselves as powerful as God.

And so it continues to the present day; in spite of valid concerns, for example, about cloning & experimentation on embryonic stem cells,

which make a mockery of human dignity
and the preciousness of human life,
some scientists do “whatever they presume to do,”
to quote God referencing the tower.

God’s final covenant is when he sends Jesus,
his Son, to be our Savior and our Lord,
to save us from our sin
and bring us back to God, once again.
God never gives up on us, and 2000 years ago,
made his ultimate covenant with us.

From that time forward there would be no more need for covenants
between God and us,
because Jesus is our link, our connection with God.
Well, then, if Jesus is the new covenant,
bringing us to God and bringing God to us,
in his Body and his Blood,
what is our part in this covenant?
Covenants are two-way streets.

Looking at Jesus’ entire life,
we can see that he was always teaching us,
showing us by his example,
how we were to live,
how we were to relate to others,
treating them always with patience and love,
and giving them what they most needed,
in the best way we could.

It’s what he means when he says,
as he says so often, “follow me.”
Do what I do,
care for people the way I do,
and then you will teach them and heal them,
and then maybe they will go on to be disciples too.

Today we find Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry,
just after he has been baptized in the Jordan by John.
He takes up John’s call for repentance
and for the need for people to reform their lives.
“The kingdom of God is at hand,” he cries,
and that cry is for you and me
as we begin again six weeks of preparation for Easter.

That cry and that invitation is our part of the new covenant
between God and us.
Let me spell out what I mean.
We are all disciples of Christ through our baptism.
At the same time we are also human,
still falling short of all that God imagines possible for us,
still sinners and still in need of reforming our lives.

Now I know that when Lent begins most people,
including me,
think automatically about what we will give up.

Will it be chocolate, or coffee, or desserts?
There's nothing wrong with making those kinds of sacrifices,
and they are not easy.
They are a part of fasting, one of the age-old Lenten practices.
But, from another point of view, they are also easy
because they don't demand that we change in any fundamental way.
Lent comes, we do our usual giving up of something,
with more or less success,
and we are satisfied.

I think our part of the covenant with God,
of which we have been speaking,
asks more of us than what we do usually,
as difficult as that might be.

We're supposed to reform, to actually change in some way.
I think that the idea is to become more holy, more virtuous,
to become more what a disciple of Christ is supposed to be.

This kind of change takes time.
It requires at least six weeks,
according to behavioral psychologists,
to make new habits.

So why not, this Lent,
during these six weeks,
begin to make some small
but fundamental change in the way we live and relate to people?

What would you like to improve on in yourself?
Become a little more patient,
or a bit more willing to stand up for what you believe?
What would make you a better person?
Perhaps showing more kindness to someone,
or maybe starting to forgive those who have injured you?

Here is a little exercise that would take five minutes or less:
first, identify the area in yourself that you'd like to improve.
Then, each night before falling asleep,
quickly review the day and note the times you were more patient,
or more forgiving, or more kind.
Note the times you missed the mark.
Give thanks for the good results and ask forgiveness for any sins,
then go to sleep.

May the Lord Jesus and his Holy Spirit be with us this Lent
and help us to become better people,
to give us the courage to take stock of the areas where we need to grow
in order to reform our lives. Amen.