

1st Lent

March 1, 2009

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“Sacrificial Covenant”

Today is the first Sunday of the Holy Season of Lent. The readings for today, speak of covenant. There is the covenant between God and Noah, in the Book of Genesis; the covenant Peter talks about, in the 2nd reading, our covenant with God through baptism, and there is the covenant Jesus makes with his father, in the wilderness.

Covenant is not a 21st century word, yet each of us, has several covenants in our lives. We have a covenant when we bring a child into the world, that we will care for them, nurture, cherish and love them all their days. We did not sign a paper, we did not make a verbal promise, but you and I know that we have a commitment, an obligation and a duty that is so strong, that the universe would groan in anguish if we broke it. We have a covenant.

If I ask you to write down on paper, what you think binds that covenant, you would all write “love.”

Covenants are different from contracts, because they are based on love. Marriage is a covenant; it is a binding agreement between two people, based on love. If that love should evaporate, then marriage reverts to being a mere contract.

In the Old Testament, Israel’s covenant with Yahweh was expressed in the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. It was meant to be a bond of love, so strong that it could never be broken. The trouble with the Old Testament covenant was that it was never a covenant between equals, and Israel was never capable of keeping it.

Jesus goes out into the wilderness beyond the Jordan, in today’s Gospel and forges a covenant with God his father. It goes like this:

“I will make your name known. I will bring about your Kingdom, on earth. I will suffer and even die in this human form, if you will allow all who follow me, all who choose to be Kingdom people, if you will allow them to be called your children too.”

It was a covenant based on love, signed in blood, and it was unbreakable.

Though our baptism, Peter tells us, that we have a share in this covenant.

Primarily, our response to living out our baptism covenant lies in the teaching of Jesus and his Gospel. For all of us the way we have chosen to do that is as Episcopalians.

In that sense, each of us has a particular Episcopalian covenant with God. In that covenant we vow to live out the meaning of our baptism and our following Jesus, and his teaching in a particular way. Being an Episcopalian is to have a treble focus; what we believe; how we worship; and our service to the mission of Christ’s church.

Faith, worship and mission, sums up our covenant commitment.

Our faith we find in the words of scripture, the Book of Common Prayer and the Apostles and Nicene Creed. Our worship had been handed down to us since the Apostles and is both scriptural and sacramental and found in the Prayer Book. Our service is to the mission of Jesus as he taught us in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Gospels.

Lent reminds us, that in following Christ and living out the terms of our Baptismal Covenant, we have a duty to 1) know our faith, 2) to attend worship and 3) to work for the success of Christ's mission.

We could sit down and read every book ever written, "On being an Episcopalian", including the Canons and Constitutions, but take it from me that not one word of it will make you a better Episcopalian, or a better Christian. The reason is simple, "real covenants are based on love." If we truly love, what we are about, then it is for us a sacred trust, a holy covenant something between each one of us as individuals and God.

Jesus in today's Gospel, goes out into the wilderness, where he is tempted. There he prays alone with God his Father. Lent is for each of us, a wilderness where God speaks to each of us as individuals. He asks us to accept his covenant. That covenant is to agree to be heirs to his Kingdom, by following his sons teaching and building that Kingdom in faith, worship and service.

Unless we have love, that covenant cannot hold. No matter how much we say we "love" this church, our Christian faith, or Jesus himself, our faith covenant demands that we "demonstrate" that love by our actions.

As the Episcopal presence in Pike County, as Christ's mission to the poor and the oppressed, we cannot continue to limp along with 60% of the parish committed to Jesus and his mission and 40% indifferent.

And we can all get complacent and indifferent real quick. We begin to take so many things for granted, like what God has done for us in our life. We take it for granted that our health is okay, the children are well, our finances are in order, and our world is how it should be. Any Sunday, the church, our mission, will be fine without us. We grow careless in prayer, leave mission and stewardship to others and slowly we are indifferent. We can never afford to be indifferent.

The last year economically, should have told us, that indifference and complacency are not something we can afford, when it comes to God and his plan for us. We need to be vigilant and dutiful, faithful and prepared to keep the bond of our covenant with God strong and the most important element of our life.

This is our covenant, that our God will protect and safe guard us in good times and bad if we follow faithful the son he sent us.

Even that today, is not enough because Jesus' mission calls us to go beyond self preservation to care for all who are suffering in these desperate times. Those who have lost everything; jobs, homes, houses and future. It is not enough for us to pray for them. We have to be prepared to help, in whatever way we can. We cannot do that if we are struggling ourselves. We can provide good and reasonably priced child care, if we have people, who will volunteer their time and talents. We can have a successful food pantry, if we continue to remember to bring the food that feeds the hungry.

We can heat the church and maintain an office staff only if we have people who pledge and support the church financially. The facts of running a church are cold and stark. When we cut our pledge, God's work does not get done, office hours are cut back, heat is turned off, and the poor are turned away. We cannot keep that covenant of love without making sacrifices.

Is that what Jesus learned when he went out into the wilderness? Did he learn that everything that is good, everything that is holy, everything that is worth while needs sacrifice, a sacrifice of love? Daily our soldiers and military make that sacrifice; Jesus made it on the cross of Calvary. We are called to make it in Lent that others might find in this church, a safe haven against, abuse, a house of prayer in troubled times, a refuge against hunger and cold and a welcome for the homeless.

Succeed in this, and we can call ourselves a covenant, a holy place, a place where our God has chosen to dwell.

Amen+