



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea THE FIRST SUNDAY
The Episcopal Church IN LENT
in Destin, Florida February 18, 2024

A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

In our Eucharistic Prayer, we recall Christ's statement at the Last Supper, "This is my blood of the New Covenant." Two questions might come to mind. If this is the new covenant, what was the old or prior covenant? And "What is a covenant?" Well, we know from this morning's reading from Genesis that at least one "old" covenant was God's covenant with Noah after the flood subsided. But what is a covenant in the first place? Is it like a contract? Or does it differ from a contract? And, if so, how?

Now in a typical contract, there are mutual promises. For example, we once entered into a contract with Sears Home Warranty. They agreed to diagnose and repair or replace appliances in our home when they malfunctioned or failed. We agreed to pay them \$49.95 a month for the warranty plus a modest deductible if they have to send someone out to work on our appliance. The legal concept that holds this all together is the requirement for what is called "consideration." In consideration of our paying Sears, they agree to come fix our broken appliances. Or so we thought.

So when our microwave failed a few years back, we called them. And they sent a local service person, who promptly diagnosed a faulty switch-circuit card. Then nothing happened and continued not to happen...for months. To make a very long story very short, months later, with our microwave still silent and dark and cold, I spent an hour on the phone, yet again, this time with three people at Sears. We were informed that they would have to set up another service call so someone can come out and make sure that our microwave was still broken.

You cannot make this stuff up. So I immediately prepared an entertaining three-page single-spaced letter to the President and CEO of Sears, their General Counsel, and sent it via one of their high-priced Washington lawyers. I informed them that I was delighted to hear that they must believe in miracles, that somehow our microwave had started working again without being touched or, apparently, even thought about by Sears Home Warranty.

But we get the idea. The types of contracts we are most familiar with involve mutual promises and commitments that typically are enforceable in court.

But back to Noah. And what do we notice about God's covenant with Noah? Noah has to do nothing. God promises never to destroy the earth again. In fact, God enters into a covenant with Noah and his descendants after him and every living creature for all future generations. But, again, it is unconditional.

No consideration is required of Noah, his descendants, or, indeed, all creation ever. Under common law principals, this might not even qualify as a contract. But it is a covenant.

As if God cannot believe that God made a covenant that extraordinary and generous, God tells Noah that when its cloudy and rainy, the rainbow will be a reminder to God so that God will not – dare we say, conveniently – forget the covenant and destroy the earth and all living creatures again. By the way, we call this the Noahide Covenant. We might note that God also told Noah he and his family and his descendants could eat meat. This has prompted our favorite barbecue restaurant in Austin to provide t-shirts to the staff inscribed on the back with “I did not work my way up to the top of the food chain just to eat vegetables.” It was, indeed, a glorious day.

The Noahide covenant was the first of many., including, but not limited to:

The covenants with Abraham for land and offspring;

The Davidic covenant that a messiah would spring from the line of David;

The so-called “new covenant” announced by Jeremiah;

And many more.

But let's pause and talk about the “new covenant” with Jeremiah. Because that took the notion of covenant in a new direction.

God simply offers “forgiveness,” the restoration of a broken relationship. And it is not a covenant with a nation or community or people. There is no promise of “territory, riches, long life, health, or progeny.”¹ In essence God promises that the Law, the *Torah*, no longer need be taught. It will be written on people's hearts rather than stone tablets. And God “will forgive their iniquities and remember their sins no more.”² We might recall that this is the same God who promised never to destroy the world again even though God

¹ “Covenant,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1192.

² Jer. 34.

fully understood how wayward humanity could be and would continue to be. Now God lays out the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation.

And again, what are the conditions? What is the consideration on our side? There is none. God has promised that each of us will have a spark of divinity in our hearts and that our sins are forgiven – and forgotten. As the psalmist prayed (as might we all):

Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions;
remember me according to your love and for the sake of your
goodness, O LORD.

But before we consider God's unremitting love and mercy an invitation to a sinful life without consequence, let's pause and ponder for a moment. Is there anything we could promise God in return that God needs? Is there a way we can sin that will not visit unfortunate consequences on ourselves or others? After all, God only promised God would not destroy the world. Perhaps. God knew that we could do that quite well ourselves without any divine assistance.

On the other hand, if someone has been inordinately loving and generous to us, how are we inclined to respond? Perhaps, with gratitude and love on our parts. Would that be an unreasonable expectation, even if nothing were actually demanded.

And, indeed, to put ourselves in God's position – as if that were possible –, would we not have some expectations of those to whom we have been extraordinarily loving? Would we not expect them to be grateful and even responsive to our expectations at times? Would we not be disappointed as a parent is when a child disobeys or lacked gratitude? And like a parent, would we not let our wayward children suffer the consequences of their misdeeds, yet still forgive them?

The God of Noah promised to withhold punishment, at least in its severest form. The God of Jeremiah – same God, of course – promised forgiveness and reconciliation. All with no strings attached. But, perhaps, with an expectation that we would be grateful and responsive to God's vision for us.

And yet if we fail to respond to God's expectations and God is tempted to give up on us, God will see the rainbow and remember his covenant with Noah. And God will be reminded and remain steadfast in adherence to God's covenant.

God knew, too, that we might benefit from a reminder of God's covenants with us. So what does Jesus say at the Last Supper? He blessed the wine and

called it the blood of the New Covenant. He said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

We might consider it a reminder to us like the rainbow is for God. We are reminded of God's covenants never to destroy the earth despite our sinfulness, of God's covenant to reside in our hearts, of God's reconciling with us, forgiving us, and forgetting our sins.

And we are reminded of the ultimate reconciliation of God and humanity in the passion and resurrection of Christ. All unconditional. All products of God's grace and pure, undying love for us. "Do this in remembrance of me." Do this in remembrance of what God has done for us. Be grateful. And respond with the love and fidelity that reflects the love and fidelity God has shown us in covenants both old and new.

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