

Covenant Connections

The psalms often lift up praise for the steadfast love of God for humankind, celebrating God's love for this creature God made in God's image; the love that leads God to desire a relationship like that in that long ago paradise known as the Garden of Eden...that idyllic period when God met that creature made in his image for evening walks. We often marvel at the persistent pursuit God has made to establish this relationship despite the continued resistance of those same creatures to respond to these invitations to draw close...it can seem even more amazing when we put those revealed invitations as they are recorded in our scriptures in the close proximity that we have done on this Lenten journey. We have read the documentation of these efforts as they have been recorded as covenants which God initiated; each offering promises of presence and relationship with us. The covenant in the Hebrew text before us this morning is in many ways the most elaborate and detailed in terms of explicit guidance given; in the outline of expectations. It also represents the beginning of a change in how the distance will grow between God and the people for evidently God personally visited with Abraham and Moses but will not be seen again on earth again except in visions until Emmanuel comes. This distancing comes at the people's request. The early texts do not describe God's appearance but do not seem to treat his speaking with individuals as anything unusual. The texts just tell us that God sees this or that and responds to what is seen. That God speaks with Noah and tells him to build the ark, gives him precise instructions, and this interaction continues throughout the flood and aftermath is written as a narrative without the interjection of astonishment. Noah never seems surprised to see God show up and the first covenant is made between all humankind and all creatures after the flood waters recede. Time passes and then we are told God speaks to another individual named Abram. The text does not give any background about Abram other than his lineage as a descendent of Noah through Shem to Terah, Abram's father who moved the family to Ur. There is no mention of his having a special relationship with God, but God initiates this special relationship with him. God invites him to pack his bags and go...go somewhere...but does not give him a destination...just a promise that when he gets there God will let him know he has arrived. Then he will be blessed...and he is told the blessing will be this: "I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the ones who curse you I will curse; and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." There is no time frame given for this journey, but Abram sets out with his wife and family. The journey turns out to be much longer than Abram expects, and there are some pitfalls along the way. In fact, Abram and God have several conversations before the covenant that was the

text of last Sunday's scripture is made and Abram becomes Abraham and the rite of circumcision is begun. Although Abraham's faith is constantly held up as a model for us, a careful read of the scripture itself finds several places where Abraham's trust faltered as time passed and he and Sarah did not have the son he so desired which would make his name great and ensure his descendants would be numerous. God did fulfill his promise and Isaac was born, but the birth of Ishmael illustrates that Abraham did not always place complete his trust in his God to fulfill the promise and set about to do things his own way. The episode which comes later which the Jewish tradition calls the binding of Isaac is an illustration of how much God values this complete trust that he asks of us. Abraham takes his beloved son and places him on an altar at God's command, but the sacrifice is not required as God provides a ram in the thicket for an actual sacrifice. God's promises as made in the covenants are made because God reaches out desiring this relationship...because God loves the creation and creatures that he brought into being. Despite the many times the human beings invited into this relationship fail to respond as God desires, God keeps God's promises. God's steadfast love is always present and seeking this covenant relationship even when those which have been invited to join forget or ignore God. This brings us to the third and last covenant that is recorded as being made with humankind in the Hebrew Scriptures; the covenant that is known as the Torah or the Law. This covenant is made with a rather motley group of people who have ties to Abraham...they are descendants of the sons of Jacob whose name was changed to Israel after he wrestled with God. They have been living in Egypt for many years and their status has changed greatly...having arrived as relatives of Joseph, who has risen from being a slave to being second in command to the Pharaoh...to now being feared by that same ruling dynasty. The story of these people begins in Exodus without telling us much about how much the people living in Egypt remember about that relationship with God, only that as their situation worsened they cried out to God, and that the midwives feared God more than the Pharaoh. This is how the story of Moses begins and how Moses ends up being raised in the household of the Pharaoh knowing little of his Jewish heritage, but fleeing back to the land where the mountain of God was located for his first encounter with God. The reason for this back tracking is to point out that while we often talk about this covenant God makes with these people at Mt. Sinai, we don't spend time connecting the story to God's pursuit of them to bring them here in the first place. God has already claimed them as his beloved people. God has gathered them here. God has already set them free from the situation of slavery in Egypt. God has gotten them safely away from pursuit, provided food and water in the wilderness. God is trying to establish a relationship with them that will lead them to trust that God will provide for them. Before we get to the text with the guidance known as the Ten Commandments, there is an interesting passage where God speaks to Moses and gives him this message for the people in Exodus 19:4-- "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." So Moses repeated these words to the assembled people who responded in verse 8: "Everything the Lord has spoken we will do." At this point the gathered people commit to being the Lord's people, God's treasured

possession. It is at this point that God speaks the words that form the guiding principles of the Torah. I know that most of us at some point memorized these, either in this form or from the Deuteronomy text which is essentially the same. What I want us to consider is what the purpose and meaning of the whole covenant is. We can begin by reviewing the first words God spoke: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This reminds the people that this is to be a personal relationship...I am your God. What I am going to tell you is meant to be a gift to you from the one who has redeemed you from slavery. When Moses went to the Pharaoh, he told the Pharaoh that God wanted him to let his people go. This covenant is not a new covenant, or a new relationship between the people and God, but here God is going to try to mold these people into citizens of the kingdom God desires to dwell on earth. God is trying to form that holy nation, a community which will live together in a certain way. The commandments do not give judicial procedures or establish punishments for failures of obedience, although as history shows there will be consequences. Obedience is however, obligatory because they are being given by the Lord your God who has created and redeemed you. John Calvin declared that there are three uses of the Torah as given by God to Israel. The first is the one that is easiest to see: It gave guidance and provided boundaries for how to live together in community; the theme underlying the guidance was that those in the community were to trust God and each other. Members of the community would do no harm to each other. The problem was and always has been that human beings don't like rules, even those which are made for their own well-being. It turns out most of the time we are persuaded to obey laws because of fear. John Calvin felt that this was an acceptable use of the Torah for any who did not believe in God. However, there has been some theology based on an image of God as wrathful and desiring of punishing disobedient people. The Hebrew Scriptures devoted to the 8th and 9th century prophets and the exile certainly lend weight to that, although many passages in Isaiah speak to the words of grief that Isaiah brought to the people over their situation. Again, there is a grain of truth in these things. But in many respects, if we pursue our Lenten reflections deeply we might find that it is the consequences of our sin that bring the bad outcomes into our lives; it is the consequences of our failures to trust, to act with love and compassion, with empathy to those in our families and lives which bring about the most heartache. If we apply that to our culture as a whole, we might find that it is the systems and structures we have allowed which are contrary to God's system of justice and equity that cause much of the brokenness of our world. Again, all of these covenants represent God seeking to call us all into that relationship of love and trust envisioned from the beginning. And this brings us to the covenant which Jesus will describe in a few weeks at that last meal with his disciples; the covenant he will make by shedding his blood. The covenant that Paul will describe in the letter to the Corinthians as the foolishness of God; foolishness seen in the scandal of the cross. The passage from John's gospel describing Jesus in Jerusalem early in his ministry is very different than the synoptic gospels. In those narratives he does not go to Jerusalem until near the very end, and it is at the end that he either clears or cleans the Temple courtyard, depending upon the translation. Jesus is not meek or mild here. He wants his Father's house to be solely a place of worship, no moneychangers or things of the marketplace allowed. We need to allow this image of Jesus into our concept of who Jesus was. We have not yet reached the

completion of that covenant that Jesus made on our journey this year, but the covenant was completed over two thousand years ago. The terms were changed in that God invites us to invite God inside our lives, to dwell within us, not that rules about community were changed, but sho in spirit and in love so that we love as God loves, so that we can this see the world and others as God sees it and them. Once we do that, the Torah of God is truly a gift to us given in love by the One who created and redeems us, who loves us no matter how undeserving we are, and who seeks to draw us ever closer in that relationship of love and trust. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.