

The Covenant

The Bible talks a lot about covenants. Last Sunday we heard about the covenant the Lord made with Noah, Noah's family, and all living creatures, that the Lord would never again destroy the earth by a flood. This week we hear about how God made a covenant with Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. In fact, each Sunday in Lent the first lesson will deal with one of the great covenants God made with his people in the Old Testament. So what exactly is a covenant?

A covenant is like a contract, or a promise. When two people make a covenant, they specify what duties and responsibilities they have toward each other, and what benefits or rewards, each will receive from the agreement. Normally, either party can chose to end the covenant at any time. The covenants the Lord makes are a little different though. For instance, the covenant the Lord made with Abraham came totally from God's initiative. In that covenant, almost all the benefit is Abraham's, he gets to be the father of a multitude, and almost all the responsibility falls on the Lord, he has to insure that Abraham and his descendants will survive and prosper. And the covenants the Lord makes cannot be terminated, they last forever.

As we said, the Lord promised Abraham that he and his wife Sarah would be the ancestors of many people, which seemed unlikely since they were in their nineties and childless. Childlessness was considered a great tragedy in those days, not only because a couple didn't have a child to love, but

because there would be no heir to inherit the family property and carry on the family line. The Lord promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child, and both of them on separate occasions laughed at that because it was so preposterous. But the Lord fulfilled His end of the bargain and their son Isaac was born. Both Christians and Jews trace their ancestry back to Abraham through Isaac; and the Muslims trace their ancestry back to Abraham through his other son Ishmael. Abraham certainly did get to be the father of a multitude, which is what the new name the Lord gave him means.

What benefit did God get out of this arrangement with Abraham? The Lord's ultimate goal, his fondest desire, is to be in close, loving communion with us, the people he created. To accomplish that he needed a way to communicate with us that we humans could understand. By choosing a human being, Abraham, to be the father of a great multitude, the Lord created a people, a nation, dedicated to him. Through these chosen people, the Jews, the Lord could prepare human beings by His word and by His mighty acts for the coming of our Savior, God's ultimate revelation of himself, in Jesus Christ. What the Lord got out of the bargain was a way to express his love for us as deeply as possible. That's God's nature; always putting us first.

What was it that God required of Abraham in this covenant? Abraham is told to walk before the Lord and be blameless. What could that mean? Some rabbis in St. Paul's time hypothesized that Abraham must have intuitively followed the Mosaic Law even before it was given to Moses, and in that way Abraham was blameless before the Lord. Paul saw something different there. Paul says that it was Abraham's faith that justified him; it

was the fact that he trusted and obeyed the Lord that God counted as righteousness. If we would read verses 8-14 of Genesis chapter 17, we would see how the Lord required that all the males of Abraham's family be circumcised as infants, marking them in their flesh as the Lord's people.

Holy Baptism is similar for us. Baptism is the mark we receive branding us as God's children forever. It is the sign of the new covenant we have with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just like the covenant with Abraham, the covenant God makes with us in Baptism is all his initiative. We are the unwitting recipients of his mercy and grace. Again, the benefit is almost all ours; we get the promise of eternal life. But still, the Lord calls us, as he called Abraham, to walk before Him and be blameless. How might we do that? Lent is a good time for us to take an inventory of the covenants God has made with us, and to evaluate how faithful we are being to what the Lord requires of us.

When a child is baptized the parents make a promise to bring the child to the services of God's house; teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments; to place in their hands the Holy Scriptures; and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith. How are we doing with those baptismal covenants? We've had a lot of baptisms in the last couple years and I am always delighted to hear the comments from our members about how wonderful it is to have so many infants and toddlers in worship these days. I know it can be a challenge to bring small children to church, especially when one parent is doing it alone. But what a great thing you are doing for your child, and how faithful you are being to your promises to God. In a couple weeks we will be having our First Communion classes,

and it is so gratifying for me to now be sharing Holy Communion with children I baptized. The wheel of the covenant keeps turning.

When young adults are confirmed, or when adults join our congregation, they promise to live among God's faithful people; to hear His word and share in His supper; to proclaim the good news of Christ through word and deed; to serve all people; and to strive for peace and justice. How are we doing with this church membership covenant? Again I'd have to say we're doing pretty well, as I am constantly amazed at all the many ways the people of our church find to serve one another and the community, and how generous they are supporting those in need and keeping God's house. Of course, I always agonize over the people who fall out of the habit of worship and drift away from the fellowship of the church, and I pray for those who have become inactive to return to an active, lively faith life.

Lent is a time when many active Christians get even more intentional about walking before the Lord and striving to be blameless. I read something the other day by Max Lucado that struck me as good advice for those who want to make a difference in the world by living a holy life. He suggested: "Be the one at the office who refuses to cheat; Be the neighbor who acts neighborly; Be the employee who does the work and doesn't complain; Pay your bills; Do your part and enjoy life; Be faithful to your spouse; Don't speak one message and live another." I think that practical, doable advice.

When I was ordained I made some promises. I promised to preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions. Each year there is a

service during Holy Week where the pastors of our synod can gather to renew their ordination vows. It occurred to me that the people I really ought to be renewing those before is you, the people who called me, the people who I serve. So let me renew that covenant today with you, and make three specific promises to you, which are very important because there is tremendous, tremendous, pressure on pastors today to be unfaithful to Christ and the faith of his church in these areas:

#1. I will not denigrate God's Holy Name. I will continue to preach and teach in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I will not worship more gods than the One Holy God or less gods than the Holy Trinity. I will not be ashamed of God's name, I will delight to call Him Father, and I will avoid the aberrant names for God so popular today.

#2. I will proclaim the Bible as God's Holy Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit. I will believe and teach that the Bible is intended to be our rule and norm for all doctrine. I will teach that the Bible reveals to us the mind of Christ and tells us everything necessary for our salvation. I will accept no higher authority in the church than God's Word Alone.

And #3. I will not fail to properly distinguish law and gospel. God's word to us gives us knowledge of both His righteous command and His unmerited love. We need to hear both judgment and forgiveness. I will not be a preacher of cheap grace or a theology of glory. I will preach Jesus Christ and him crucified, as a comfort for those in terror over their sins, and to instruct Christians as to how to lead a God-pleasing life.

Abraham walked before the Lord and was blameless. By God's help, may we do likewise. Let us now praise Abraham's God and ours. Amen.