

Covenant

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, February 28, 2010 and is based Genesis 15:1-12,17-18.

“He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half against the other, but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking pot and a flaming torch passed between those pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram...”

A few years ago, a visiting minister here at Saint Luke’s maintained that this story from the 15th chapter of Genesis happened to be one of the more important stories in all of scripture. I’ll admit this really had my attention because these verses seem so weird, these verses with the darkness, and the carcasses, and the smoking pot...

But it all made sense as the preacher invited us to enter the long ago world of Abram; Abram, formerly from Ur of the Chaldeans but now far from home and wandering on a promise from God; the long ago world of Abram, where land and children were the only things that mattered; the long ago world of Abram, where covenants were made so that people might live in safety and in peace.

And in this long ago world, Abram, of all people needed such a covenant. This was a lost time for Abram, a man who left his home behind in such hope but now wondered if his dreams would ever come true. God promised him land and he promised children. By the 15th chapter of Genesis he had neither. Abram needed a covenant, and here, he got one.

Covenant. This is what I know about covenants:

Covenants were a big deal, and in this long ago world they were not simply given lip service. A covenant would be cut, meaning something had to be cut, in order to demonstrate the seriousness of the transaction and into leave behind a scar or a mark as a lasting reminder...

As best I can tell, covenants worked this way. A farmer or herdsman would need to join forces with another in order to be protected from bandits or hostile neighbors. A covenant was cut, say, across the hand, so that the blood of the two parties would be mingled and that a scar might serve as a sign and a warning that the two would stand together. I did something like this in a tree house in third grade. It pays to have a blood brother.

Apparently there was even more to the deal. Each party would not only have a scar but would also get a piece of the other’s name. For instance, Joe the sheep man would enter a covenant

with Fred the cattleman. He would then become Joe Fred the sheep cattleman, and the other would become Fred Joe the cattle sheep man. They would become family.

So here, in the 15th chapter of Genesis and under a night sky, God cut a covenant with Abram. Here lies the meaning behind the carcasses, the darkness, and the dream of the smoky pot. These were God's signs that a deal had been struck, and for future generations of Hebrews, as numerous as the stars in the sky, the mark of circumcision would be their sign that the covenant was everlasting. The descendents of Abram would be His people, and He would be their God.

In time, Abram would even get a piece of God's name. Yahweh, the God of Israel, would change his name to Abraham so that all might see and know they were family.

Now this story might seem an interesting footnote in the history of ancient Israel had something not happened that first Easter day. When the Resurrected Jesus appeared before his disciples and after death had been defeated forever, after a new life was suddenly possible and the promises of God were for all, I want you to notice that Jesus appeared, in a resurrected body, with scars.

Nail prints are the sign of our covenant, and the promise is life. We are his people and he is our God. Nail prints remind us the covenant has been cut forever. This is our Gospel, our hope.

With news like this, I suppose we could simply heave a sigh of relief and rest in the assurance that we will get to heaven when we die. And while this is true, there is more to our covenant than a place in the sweet by and by...

Remember what we've learned about covenants: Covenants give safety; covenants give meaning; covenants give purpose; covenants give courage, and of all these perhaps courage is the best news of all.

We need courage these days. We live in a lost time. Let's be honest, if we aren't scared to death then were likely to be stuck in a ditch of complacency or self interest, while the world is falling down around us.

We have more technology at our fingertips than we imagined just a few years ago, and yet we have never been more separate, more lonely. Newspapers tell us daily of elected leaders that are either stuck in gridlock or on the take; the best of them shouted down while others jump like rats off a sinking ship. We are up to our eyeballs in debt, as for the recession; there seems no end in sight.

We, of all people, need a covenant.

There is another word for all this, another word for the over arching problem, and that word is sin, though sin is a topic most of us would rather avoid. We avoid talking about sin because we are apt to think it's just a ploy to make us feel badly about ourselves, or a guilt trip to enforce good behavior. Perhaps we think of sin as something we wish we could get away with.

This much I know. I will never feel comfortable calling out someone else's sin since I've committed about 50 since I woke up this morning. But that doesn't make the problem go away. So, even though we don't like to talk about sin, let's all agree there is something that keeps us up at night.

Maybe we need a new definition. Sin has been described as separation or disintegration, from each other, from God, from our inmost selves, and that makes sense to me. There's a lot of that going around these days.

That said, sin is also subtle, tricky, and sometimes it's just hard to know until we look up and find ourselves lost in the desert.

There is a great example of this in a new movie called "Crazy heart." Jeff Bridges stars as a country music singer and he will likely win an Oscar. The story is one of disintegration; or in other words, the man is slowly dying but he doesn't know it. He sings a ballad as part of his road show, formerly a best seller but now a tired old re-run, and as he sings to boozy little tables in dark little rooms he says something about sin: "Sometimes falling feels like flying, for a little while."

My point is this. Sin is subtle, and tricky, and we don't have to be bad people in order to be lost.

We need a covenant, now more than ever. We need reconnection, restoration. We need courage.

For God so loved the world, we are told, that he gave His only begotten Son. This means that Jesus came to live on this world, make friends on this world, laugh and cry and dream on this world, and finally to die and rise again so that He might know us and that we might live forever with him. He came to make us whole, to make us free, to give us life. He came to destroy sin. He came to show us the way home.

Last week I was invited to speak to a men's group at Saint Martin's in the Pines, the retirement community down the road. As I waited for the men to arrive, I struck a conversation with two fellows who grew up on the west side of Birmingham, like me. Although we grew up in different times and in different worlds, there were still connecting landmarks, like the Bright Star, and the steel industry, and the old Fairgrounds.

They spoke of the Fairgrounds like it was yesterday, and of them told something I hadn't heard before. He told me that when he was a little boy, Vulcan stood on the grounds; Vulcan wasn't moved to Red Mountain until the late 1930's, so that when he was a child the statue was a part of the old Fairgrounds.

But there was more to the story. He told me that Vulcan's arm was put on wrong when he was reassembled from the St. Louis World's fair, so that it stuck out backwards, and that someone lost his spear, so that his hands were empty except for the time he held a giant ice cream cone.

“Here’s the best part” he told me. “You could never get lost from your mama or your daddy because you could always meet them at the iron man.”

Our covenant is like that. We can always meet at the foot of the cross. Nail prints remind us that we can go home. Nail prints are God’s promise that we are never lost to him. Nail prints are our hope. Go home.