

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. *Amen.*

During this Year B in the season of Lent, our Old Testament readings have focused on God's covenantal relationship with the people of Israel. We began with the story of Noah and the ark, which led to God's promise that there would never again be a flood to destroy the earth. We heard the story of God's covenant with Abram to make him the ancestor of a multitude of nations. In the Ten Commandments, we saw God establish a means for God's people to live together in purpose and peace with God and with each other. Last week we heard about the bronze serpent, yet another means by which God chose to make and keep a covenant with God's people.

Over and over again, we've seen God try one thing after another with our ancestors in faith—just one more thing to give them the means and reason to live in community with God. And over and over again we've seen a lack of response by the people God loves so much, people created in God's own image, God's beloved, chosen people. Finally, God sent Jesus, God's only son, in yet another covenant, a promise that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Friday evening I turned on the news to hear about the bombing of a mosque in Yemen, just a couple of days after a museum in Tunisia had been attacked for reasons understood only by those who did it. The news from Israel in recent weeks makes me wonder if God's chosen people have stopped paying attention to God and have forgotten God's loving kindness to them over thousands of years. As a Christian, I'm appalled and embarrassed by Rev. Franklin Graham's Facebook post earlier this week, in which he stated that the reason so many black people have died at the hands of police officers recently can be reduced simply to "their lack of obedience and bad parenting." One can only imagine God's frustration and sadness at our collective inability to get the point God has been making since the beginning of time.

The word "covenant," means "a formal and serious agreement or promise." In our legalistic culture, we tend to think of it as a contract, that is, "a binding agreement between two or more persons or parties; *especially* an agreement that is legally enforceable." The definitions are similar, but different in very subtle ways. "Contract" implies that *two* parties *negotiated* the terms that would afterward be enforceable through specifically named repercussions if the terms were not honored. The ancient covenants between God and God's people were obviously more unilateral, in that one party—God, that is—had much more power in the deal than the other. God set the terms, and God had—and still has—the power to determine enforcement and/or punishment. A covenant with God is enforceable by God; we've seen over and over again how God has reacted when God's people haven't kept their part of the covenant. We can agree that life generally doesn't seem to go well for those who break it. What we may not see or consider is that in all of those ancient covenants between God and God's people, there's nothing obvious at stake from God's side, nothing that we know of for God to lose. We do indeed worship a very generous God, who seems to turn the other cheek without hesitation.

Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant suggests that the old one was irreparably broken. At the very least, it needed to be reworked because human beings were prone to errors in judgment and temperament that made them likely to break it. Apparently, humankind doesn't have the capacity or the ability to live as God desires for us to live, in a way of life that has always been *our* responsibility through our covenant with God. So Jeremiah foretells a new covenant, a new relationship between God and God's people that will be based on God's desire for humankind. Unlike the old covenant, this one will not be written in stone, but instead on people's hearts. Rather than words of judgment, this new covenant is wrapped in promises of love.

What God's people fail to see or are unable to acknowledge and accept, is that life under the new covenant announced by Jeremiah will be perfect in God's eyes and in our experience. The ideal will be found in relationship: "I will be their God, and they will be my people." God's laws will be known by all, internalized as inner knowledge and understanding, no longer something to be remembered, then practiced. Knowledge of God will be universal, so that teachings about God are no longer a wall to separate or divide people. And God will forgive iniquity and no longer remember sin. Within this covenant, sin might even become a thing of the past, taking us back to the beginning, before the first human beings disobeyed God. ...Sigh... It could be wonderful if we all would get on board with it!

In God's latest covenant with God's people, that is, in the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus Christ, the terms have become more personal on both sides, and on our side more individualized. Our belief will lead to eternal life. Believing is our responsibility in the covenant. Eternal life is God's side of the covenant, God's promise to us. It seems fairly cut and dried, doesn't it? But we make it complicated in oh-so-many ways. We forget that God came to this earth to write the law into our hearts, to teach us so that we don't have to teach each other, to love us and to be loved by us. It's simple, but it's not easy, for us at least. And the reason it's not easy is explained in that single grain of wheat Jesus speaks about in today's Gospel. "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.

This time of year, when we're thinking about planting and growing things, is the time we can most understand what Jesus meant by that. What would happen if we took a seed directly from its plant and put it into the ground? Most likely it would rot and nothing would ever come from it. But a seed that has no appearance of life whatsoever, that is dry and sometimes even withered, that has nothing left of its former self, can grow into a tall and healthy plant. And when its seeds die, the cycle begins again. It is a cycle of renewal and transformation. If we are hanging onto our lives by clinging to what is important for us today, we will never know or appreciate what God can do in or through our surrendered selves. Jesus himself showed us how one grain of wheat, when it dies, can bear much fruit. It is transformation in its purest form.

In his collection of stories called *The Manger is Empty*, Walter Wangerin tells how he tried to stop his son Matthew from stealing comic books. He tried various uses of the law over several years, but nothing worked. Finally, he resorted to something he rarely did: he spanked his son. He writes that he did it deliberately, almost ritualistically, and he was so upset when he finished that he left the room and wept. After pulling himself back together, he went into Matthew and hugged him. Years later, as Matthew and his mother were reminiscing one day, Matthew brought up that time when he kept stealing comic books. "And you know why I finally stopped?" he asked. "Sure," his mom said, "because Dad finally spanked you." "No!" Matthew replied. "No, because Dad cried."

Wangerin closes his story about his son and the comic books with these words: "Hereafter, let every accuser of my son reckon with the mercy of God, and fall into a heap and fail. For love accomplished what the law could not, and tears more powerful than Sinai. Even the Prince of Accusers shall bring no charge against my son that the Final Judge shall not dismiss. Satan, you are defeated! My God has loved my Matthew."

When the law didn't work, God resorted to Love. In this season of honest examination of ourselves, we must ask if God is crying for us. If we do not respond to the law, and if we cannot respond to the love, what does life mean for us? As we prepare to remember the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, may we break out of our illusions to face the answers, and the truth they mean for our lives, and then strive to honor God's covenant with us.

Let us pray.

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew a right spirit within each of us. Cast us not away from your presence and take not your holy spirit from us. Give us the joy of your saving help again, and sustain us with your bountiful Spirit. *Amen.*