

The Sanctuary for Lent 2021

By April Casperson

Week 2—Covenant

First Sunday in Lent, February 21

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, and with every living being with you—with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you.” (Genesis 9:8-10)

With God’s mercy comes the offer of God’s covenant. God’s covenants are so much more than promises. A covenant is an eternal commitment that is grounded in something unmovable, unchangeable, and consistent. God’s covenant to Noah extends into the infinite future, which is more than we can ever fathom. In addition, God’s covenant extends to all of creation. The Lenten journey is a season that in many ways welcomes an individualistic faith. What is my relationship with God? How do I need to “get right” with God? How has my faith journey changed, and how can I turn back toward God? However, the Lenten journey is also about the greater community. God made covenants with all of humanity, as we can see with Noah’s experiences, and Jesus came to the world for all people. He did not come just for some, and he did not simply come to the world to have individual, transactional relationships rooted in rule-following. Jesus’s existence in the world and his journey to the cross are about so much more than simplistic transactions—he brought all of humanity back to God.

Prayer: Eternal One, help my faith to expand from self-focus to an awareness of the world.

Monday, February 22

God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth.” (Genesis 9:12-13)

Covenants that come from God are unchanging, steady things. And yet, there is power in having reminders of covenants. After all, as humans we tend to forget things, even though God doesn’t. Part of the path to the cross during Lent is the

deliberate spiritual reflection upon God's promises to us—that God's grace is sufficient, that Christ came for all people, that salvation is open to everyone. Throughout scripture, these promises are expressed in covenants like the one God made with Noah.

In addition, reminders are rooted in out-of-the-ordinary experiences, like the appearance of a rainbow across the sky serving as a reminder of God's covenant with and to us. Symbols of God's covenants can take so many forms. While rituals and images are powerful, sometimes God's covenants are shown in invisible ways, like through sustaining relationships, caring for creation, and expanding boundaries to ensure that all are welcomed. In this time, consider how your life can be an expression of God's covenant to all of humanity.

Prayer: Gracious Leader, let my actions be a reflection of your covenants with humanity.

Tuesday, February 23

I offer my life to you, LORD. My God, I trust you. (Psalm 25:1-2)

Trusting God and learning how to stop relying fully on ourselves is a challenge. We are strong-willed people. I know that when I am overwhelmed by work, family commitments, and other obligations, I think that if I just simply “rely on myself” and try to “push through,” then I can somehow get everything done. As a bonus, no one else will then know just how overwhelmed I am! Relying on myself is a sure-fire way to harm my body and spirit and to center my life upon my own abilities rather than upon God's, whose covenant to us is simply that God is sufficient. We cannot defeat death (whether of the body, the mind, or the spirit) on our own. When we rely on ourselves for salvation, dependent upon our own skills and power, we create ourselves in the image of a false god. Thankfully, God's covenant to care for us remains even when we are oblivious to it or willfully ignoring it. Lent invites us to consider when we choose to prioritize ourselves over God's covenants. Perhaps you are being called to make God the center of your life once again.

Prayer: God, may my ego be set aside, and may your covenants with me reign.

Wednesday, February 24

LORD, remember your compassion and faithful love— they are forever! But don't remember the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing. Remember me only according to your faithful love for the sake of your goodness, LORD. (Psalm 25:6-7)

I take a long time to build deep relationships. When I look back, I realize that my closest friends have been present in my life for years, and I confess that I am often slow to trust. Those whom I trust and love deeply tend to have seen me at my darkest, whether I was in a stressful season at work, dealing with interpersonal challenges, or hoping for futures that were simply not visible at the time. And yet, these close friends walked with me and loved me, even when I was not at my best. God fully knows us—including our strengths and our weaknesses. God was there when we made poor decisions, when we focused only on ourselves and ignored others, and when we simply didn't live a faith-guided life. The psalmist pleads with God to ignore “the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing” and to remember them only through the grace-filled gaze of God. Lent is a season when we can turn back to God and know that God loves us fully, even the parts that aren't upright and exemplary. God loves us because God is God. May we be reminded that God's covenants depend on who God is, and not upon who we aren't.

Prayer: O Lord, I trust you.

Thursday, February 25

God guides the weak to justice, teaching them his way. (Psalm 25:9)

At first glance this brief scripture could feel a bit insulting and punitive. God guides the weak because they don't know any better? After all, the Lord is over us all. Surely I'm not one of the weak ones who needs extra guidance, right? After all, I have a faith and I care about following Jesus in my daily life.

Lent is about reconnecting to God and remembering that God's guidance is good for us. But part of this Lenten journey is also about remembering that we cannot save ourselves. God's covenant to us—to guide us and teach us—is a reminder that we cannot save ourselves through our own works, our own energy, or even our own self-deception. It's in our weakness that we discover this, and learn how to rely solely on God's guidance.

As humans, we work hard to try to present ourselves in the best light. You can see this through so many forms of media, where people share their carefully curated moments of success or their “relatable” challenges. What would it mean if you truly stopped trying to show yourself in the best light and embraced God’s guidance?

Prayer: Humble me, Teacher, as I choose my ego over you.

Friday, February 26

Baptism is like that. It saves you now—not because it removes dirt from your body but because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God. Your salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:21)

Baptism is a symbol of the work that God has already done in us. Part of God’s covenant with us is that baptism is offered to us freely, without cost; and the work of baptism isn’t based upon our own deeds, intent, or actions. While we often ask parents of babies to prepare to bring their child forward for baptism, and we ask adults to learn about the sacrament and make a public commitment to God, Jesus, and the church, we are continually reminded that baptism is about God’s work within us—not about our own actions or mindset. Baptism also reminds us that the sacramental covenant is not simply an individual connection; baptism unites all people as we remember the promises God made with all of humanity to offer salvation and grace without cost. Lent is a time when we are encouraged to remember that we cannot save ourselves, and that God is the one who offers salvation. And that salvation comes from grace offered to us—a grace that is rooted within God’s own nature, rather than anything we can do or accomplish on our own.

Prayer: God, as I remember the waters of baptism, remind me of the covenants you have made with me.

Saturday, February 27

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

(Mark 1:9-11)

When God spoke to Jesus through the Holy Spirit, I have to think that there is a reason why this act took place in public. It had to be a profoundly unique and moving experience to hear the voice of God as Jesus moved up from the water after his baptism. God's pronouncement of God's love and delight in Jesus is a statement of covenant—God cares about Jesus, and as a result God also cares about all of humanity.

Lent is a time of reflection upon our shortfalls, yes, but it is also a season when we can return to the truth that God loves and cares for us fully. God's covenant is that God's love is all-encompassing and steadfast. Even as we are all united as a community when we remember our baptism, God's covenants are present in the water, offering us grace without barriers.

Consider where God is reminding you about God's covenants. How does God's unchanging nature affect how you are called to connect to the world in this season?

Prayer: God, renew me through the waters of your grace.