

“Promises, Promises”

I really love the book of Genesis. I particularly like the early chapters and the stories of Creation, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and Abraham, Sarah and their descendants. I am particularly fascinated with how God works with imperfect and often highly flawed human beings to build an ongoing relationship with humanity. One important part of the relationship building is the focus of today’s reading from Genesis. That is God making a covenant with humanity and global flooding.¹

A covenant, even in ancient times, is usually a contract or agreement between two or more parties. Usually the agreement goes something like I will give you something and in return you will give me something. Now this could actually be an exchange of goods, money, or as in a diplomatic agreement I will not invade you if you don’t invade me. Ultimately there is some sort of give and take involved between the parties, and the parties believe they are better off for having entered into the covenant.

Biblical covenants like the one we heard about in Genesis are different in one significant way. Often when God makes a covenant with people in Genesis there is a promise from God and that is it. Let’s revisit the pericope² we just heard. Noah, his family, and the animals have exited the ark on dry ground. God looks at this and promises never to flood the earth. What do Noah, his sons or humanity have to give in return? The answer is nothing. God makes the covenant but asks nothing in return. This is remarkable.

There is much more that could be said about this particular story, but I want to turn back to Ash Wednesday for a moment. The tradition among Christians is that we make a covenant with God on Ash Wednesday. In the past the faithful abstained from eating meat and rich foods during the season of Lent. Recently some have advocated for taking on a positive discipline during Lent—e.g. volunteering with a nonprofit, prayer, sacred reading, etc. When we make this covenant we are not doing so with the expectation that God will give us something. We are returning to that biblical sense of covenant in these practices—a promise made with nothing expected in return.

But when we make these covenants do we ask God what God would like from us or do we just do it? I admit that often I have made the decision without consulting God. I do what I think God would want from me. That is more of the good religious stuff and an added dollop of self-denial as a sort of cherry on top. I figure that God will be pleased with that, and I am sure God is. But it is a bit like giving a gift to someone without asking what they might like. Dad can always use a tie or my teacher would like one of those seasonally themed sweaters. Maybe so, but then again am I doing what is simplest for me rather than discerning what is desired?

I ask that you take a moment after this homily and perhaps later when you get home to sit in silence and prayer to ask God, “What is it that you want from me this Lenten season?” God what is it that the world needs from me, that you created me to give the world?” Ask God, “What covenant have you made with me this season?”

As you sit in silence listen for the voice of God. Listen for the voice of the universe that is crying out for the very special gifts that only you possess. Don’t allow

¹ To learn more about covenants in the Bible I recommend Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Oxford Bible Companion, and, online <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/covenant/> this is somewhat older scholarship but it is easier to access because it is online.

² A fancy word meaning an extract from a text, especially a passage from the Bible.

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8:00 & 10:30 a.m.
February 18, 2018
The First Sunday in Lent, Year B

yourself to think for a moment that you don't possess unique gifts, because I have only known most of you for a few months and I think I can name at least one gift for every person in this room. Some people will have similar gifts, but they remain unique because each of you is unique.

To succeed in this life is not about money, possessions, fame, or power. To succeed is to do what we were put here to do. To use our special God-given gifts for the care of each other, for the care of our planet and other creatures, for spreading love in the face of division and animosity, and for the building up of the reign of God in the world.

Let us all revisit our Lenten practices with our eyes and ears on what God's covenant is for us and live into that this Lenten season and beyond. Listen for the voice that says, "You are my beloved." Feel the descent of the Spirit upon you like a dove. Then allow that Spirit to drive you into the wilderness of the world where your gifts are discerned. Then find that bow in the sky that symbol which will remind you of your covenant with God and with all humanity. Keep your eye on it and your covenant in your heart that you might live into the fullness of life for which only you were made.