

5th Sunday of Lent

Sermon 3.22.15

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:27-34

John 12:20-36

I haven't done right by Lent this year.

There's a progression in Lent, Year B—which is the year we're in. There's a progression in the Lenten lectionary readings from the Old Testament for this year—readings that are all about covenant.

As you may know, a covenant is a promissory struck between two parties—either two equal parties or one a sovereign power and the other a less powerful group. It's sort of like a contract. But contracts tend to be more legalistic, to attempt to take into account every possibility or eventuality, whereas covenants are more open-ended, more a matter of trust than stipulation. The most common form of covenant in our society is marriage. Marriage is a covenant. People don't go into marriage knowing how it's all going to play out; they go into it knowing only that it will play out. These two will forever be joined, come what may: for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death does them part.

As it happens, covenants have been around for a long time, thousands of years. Also as it happens, covenant is the primary way that God is understood to be in relationship with humanity, the creation, and certain groupings therein. The primary mode of sacred scripture is covenant: its content is covenant, or a grand series of covenants; and itself is covenant: a promissory binding of God to God's creation, of God's creation to God, and of particulars amidst the creation to other particulars and to the entirety. It's all covenant: the establishing thereof, the violating thereof, the forgiving among parties, and the reaffirming thereof.

More to the point this morning, though: Lent, Year B is all covenant.

Consider week one: then we might have remembered the covenant that God made with Noah following the Great Flood, a covenant through the sign of the rainbow that was for all creation. It obligated God never again to set about destroying what God had made and obligated humanity to have dominion in creation though a dominion counterbalanced by reverence for all life.

Week two might have had us consider the covenant God made with Abraham, but which was for all his descendants. By this, God was obligated to provide this people with prosperity, place, and faithfulness; and by this the people were obligated to walk with God and be blameless. This is to say that they should neither cast blame, nor defend themselves against blame, but should leave blame out of their relating altogether. To be blameless is not participate in blame—this which runs on resentment and is bound to the past.

Week three brought us to Sinai with the people Israel where God struck a covenant with Moses in the Ten Commandments. Simple and light, this law code lives on as a model for all governance of all peoples—the rule not of kings and their whims, and not of militias and their force, but of Law, equally applied to all people in all circumstances. By such a thing, there might be justice, and by justice, there might be human civilization and thriving.

Week four, which was last week, might have had us in the wilderness with the people. They had gone free out of slavery in Egypt. They had received revelation and sustenance in the otherwise fearsome wilderness. But then their wandering was worsened by the sudden presence of serpents and the frightening potential of dying by their poisoned bite. The Lord, though, offered a solution, spurring Moses to fashion a bronze serpent to be lifted up on a pole. By this, those bitten, now looking upon it, would be saved from suffering and death.

To be honest, this doesn't really fit the pattern: this is less fresh covenant and more confirmation of the Lord's presence and so faithfulness to prior covenants. To be honest, too this, an odd story, is in fact one that the people Israel perhaps appropriated from a neighboring nation: there's little from the context of their larger story that helps make sense of this bizarre event. But one thing it might mean to imply is that God wants and works for the people to be healthy.

And week five, which is this week, promises a radical move on God's part. Come from the age of the prophets, long past the age of the patriarchs, this promised new covenant will be struck *within* each person, written on the peoples' hearts. What's more, while this covenant requires of God forgiveness of the peoples' iniquity and remembering their sin no more, it requires of the people apparently nothing—

neither teaching nor testifying, for they all shall simply know the Lord. So, it's come to this: God will do all the work—of keeping us close, of keeping us true, of redeeming us and saving us and making us and the entire creation whole. We must simply live.

I haven't done right by Lent this year. I haven't rightly followed this progression, which I really should have been able to do. Why, I even wrote for *Journal for Preachers* the opening article for this season, entitled, "Preaching the Lenten Texts." In it, I mapped a course that preachers might take to follow this progression, to see how ancient covenants yet lay claim on us today.

Like, for example, the covenant that God established through Noah: surely in an age that is increasingly considered the Anthropocene—that is, the planetary epoch defined by human existence and behavior—this covenant yet lives and lays claim. So I marked the map, wondering what word we preachers might offer in this regard—what word of reverence for all life and self-restraint for common good, what word of mutual obligation and hopeful forward-looking, we might utter in the conviction that this word will have enduring effect as the preached word quickened by the Holy Spirit promises to have.

Or the covenant that God struck with Abraham: surely at a time when the Middle East roils on with generations-old blaming and thus deadly conflict, this covenant with the ancient father of three enduring peoples—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—yet lives and lays claim. So I marked the map, wondering what word we preachers might offer that would witness to the possibilities of forgiveness and the freedom that such a thing wins amidst a region ensnared in resentment and revenge.

Or how about the covenant of the Law, crystalized in the Ten Commandments: surely at a time when justice seems hard to come by if you're black in America, surely at a time when the Law seems arbitrarily, and not equally, applied, this covenant yet lives and lays claim. So, I marked the map, wondering what word we preachers might offer so to let loose our hope for equal justice—and, more specifically, for racial justice—under the Law.

Then there's the covenant regarding health care, which certainly yet lives and lays claim today. Health care, though it dominates so much of our public policy and political bickering, is rarely engaged as the complicated issue it is. Our population is

aging; the cost of healthcare is rising—and in part because of more effective, though costlier, treatments; providers are tending to specialties that pay well because healthcare as a private enterprise is expensive to get into; but as a public enterprise it gets bogged down in political fights as to what sorts of treatments are acceptable, justifiable, appropriate. In sum, it's a mess—and we do little good in preaching of complex problems as if they were clear-cut and we (alone) knew the right way through. Nonetheless, I marked the map, wondering what word we preachers might offer that witnesses to this apparent truth: that God means for God's people to be healthy and moreover to enjoy equal access to what gives health.

Well, I didn't follow my own map. If you were here at all this Lent, you'll have noticed that I preached on none of this.

The reason why undergirds this weird story from the gospel of John—this story that leaves a lot unknown.

Why these Greeks were in Jerusalem during the time of Passover, why they were going up to worship during the Passover festival: we don't know. I've read that Greeks were sometimes drawn to the strict ethic of Jewish living, and so these might have been so drawn to this Jewish festival. I've read that some Greeks made the conversion to Judaism outright, which maybe these "Greeks" had done. Really, either might be true in this case, but neither is *said* to be true in this case. All John's narrative tells us is that "among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks."

Weird.

Why they "came" to Philip, we don't know. It's possible that they were drawn to him, as opposed to most of the other disciples, because he had a Greek name. It's possible they were drawn to him because, as the text points out, Philip was from Bethsaida in Galilee, which was a largely Gentile (which is to say Greek) city. All John's narrative tells us is that "they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'"

Weird.

Most striking, though, of all the things that we don't know is this, no small detail—whether or not they actually got their wish. We don't know whether or not these Greeks actually got to see Jesus, which seems on the surface like an odd thing to leave out.

So: weird—until you consider that John’s gospel is more suggestive than narrative, more poetic and theological than synoptic and chronological.

“Come” and “see” are two words in John’s gospel that mean far more than superficially they might indicate. And maybe you know this, because I preach about this a lot, but maybe you don’t, so I’ll preach on it again.

“Come and see.” It would be said four times in this gospel, and it would be Jesus’ first spoken words according to this gospel. By this invitation, by these words, Jesus launches his ministry. “Come and see,” the first time heard when Jesus says it to two unnamed men who would become Jesus’ first disciples.

The next is just a day later, when the newly invited Philip meets up with Nathanael, tells him that they’ve found the one whom Moses and the prophets promised, and urges him, “Come and see.”

The third hearing takes the invitation further afield—into Samaria; and it comes forth from an unlikely source—a woman, unmarried, unclean, alone at the village well in the heat of the day. Jesus received water from her, because he was thirsty; and he offered water to her, living water that she might never again thirst. Then she ran to the villagers and proclaimed to them, “Come and see someone who has told me everything I’ve ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

The fourth and final time we hear this is extra-significant, and for this reason: it’s the first and final time someone speaks it back to Jesus. The invitation has come full circle, as it were. Something has become complete. It’s Mary and Martha who say it to Jesus, following the recent death of their brother Lazarus. Jesus had come to them when it was too late, when Lazarus, whom Jesus was meant to save, had already died. “Where have you laid him?” Jesus asked these loving, grieving sisters, and they answered, “Come and see.” And at this, Jesus wept.

And the question is, “Why? Why did Jesus weep?”

The answers we’ve come up with are many. Jesus wept because he missed his friend who died. (But why weep if he knows he has the power to raise him?) Jesus wept because he failed his friend who died, disappointed these dear sisters and everyone in the village. (But why worry about disappointing when he’s about to dazzle them with overcoming death?) Jesus wept because he was angry at the power

of death or at the people's yet believing in the power of death. These are some of the posited answers. I think it's simpler than that. I think Jesus wept because the invitation to know God as God truly is (self-giving, forgiving), the invitation to know God as Jesus-like (fully expressed in the bold compassion of this one person) has come full circle, has come back to its origin; so now Jesus' life is complete, and his death is demanded—so to show how utterly God is mercy, how absolutely and to the end God is love, even in face of powers and principalities that will punish such subversion of the status quo with torture and death.

It's said this is John's Gethsemane scene. It's said this, at Lazarus' failed grave, is John's version of Jesus' recognition that his ministry was coming to completion, his passion and glory are what now awaited. Raising Lazarus would attract the dread attention of the authorities. Raising Lazarus would provoke the punishing powers to act. Freeing Lazarus from death would amount to Jesus' offering himself to death instead. And at this, Jesus wept.

Then he raised Lazarus.

Then the chief priests and the elders settled on their plan to arrest Jesus and have him crucified.

And then some Greeks, who'd gone up to worship at the festival, *came* to Philip and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

See, there's a fifth occurrence of this phenomenon, but this time it's invoked rather than quoted word-for-word; and it lives not as invitation but as action. It's not that someone might come and see; it's that someone has come to see. And to wonder whether these Greeks ever got their wish is not understand what they are truly asking for. To wonder whether they actually got their wish—an audience with Jesus—is not to understand what they were truly saying.

John, in his gospel, wants his reader to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that God abides in Jesus and Jesus abides in God, that these two are truly one. Jesus is God-like and God is Jesus-like, and nowhere is Jesus more Jesus than on the cross. The cross shows us what God is like: self-giving for our sake, self-sacrificing that we might have peace. Before the cross, as regards the cross: no one is to blame and everyone is to blame. But that all comes to nothing because God doesn't deal in

blame. God doesn't keep score. God doesn't trace tragedies back to their original cause—as if there could be found an original cause to human tragedy. No, God will have none of that. God will simply act that we might be free.

I need to admit to you that I often doubt in the power of human beings to act on a grand scale for good. Maybe it's a generational thing. I'm Generation X, which means I'm following the Boomers in life and so reacting to their ethos as every succeeding generation reacts to that which came before. The Baby Boomers believed (blessedly!) in their power to change things for the better—and so they did. Hip, hip, hooray for the feminist movement! Three cheers for Civil Rights! That said, Generation X is a little more circumspect in this regard, maybe too circumspect in this regard. What attends the good that we achieve? What evil spins out of even the best intentions? And what good is won when our intention is aimed elsewhere? We mean to keep covenant, and yet we break it until at last God seems to say, "If you want something done right..."

I need to admit this to you because it affects my preaching, and perhaps *infects* my preaching. I do often doubt our capability to bring about what's good, or at least I wonder as regards working God's justice and peace into God's creation, are we essential, instrumental, or superfluous? That God's kingdom might come, that God's will might be one, that all might be made perfect and new—are we essential, instrumental, or superfluous?

It's this that had me not following my own map. It's this that had that long to-do list go unpreached during this season of Lent.

I mean, what good would it do?

Can we really achieve the ends that God's many covenants with us lay claim for us to do?

Can we make a sustainable and dynamic peace with our global environment?

Can we establish civilizations stable enough to allow for human thriving in the Middle East?

Can we reach racial justice in this land?

Can we provide health care for all who need it?

And, you know, the covenant of the cross only deepens the question. It's the old atonement puzzle. Does the crucifixion accomplish atonement, or does it reveal and lead us in the way of atonement? Does Christ on the cross win us salvation or teach us how to live—cruciform, self-restraining and self-giving—that salvation might be ours, in history and in eternity? In the cross, has God acted or are we meant to act?

Yes.

I suspect the answer to all these is, "Yes."

And I know those final questions are either/or questions. And I know that you can't answer "Yes" to either/or questions. Regardless, I suspect that the answer is, "Yes."

Yes, God has achieved salvation and peace so nothing is required of us: God has it well in hand, has already won the Day. But also this: yes, we are to work so that the world might abide in salvation and peace.

Yes: God acts for our hapless sakes; and, yes, we might also act. In hope, in faithful keeping of the covenants, looking forward and looking back, envisioning and remembering, we are permitted and empowered to act. With abundant life for all as our aim, with forgiveness as the means, with justice as our guide, and with human thriving as our standard, we must and can and are privileged to act.

So, let's get to it.

Thanks be to God.