

A Path of Covenantⁱ

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February 28, 2010, Lent 2C

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-15

The writer Nora Gallagher tells the story of entering church on Ash Wednesday and running into a friend who, when asked what she is giving up for Lent, quips: "Anne's giving up drinking, Terri's giving up chocolate, and I'm just giving up."ⁱⁱ

Although this winter has tested us all severely, I hope you're not ready to just give up. The reason behind giving something up for Lent is to lighten our load of attachments so that we can strengthen our connection with God. We give up small things to make space in our souls for more important things. You might think of Lent as a special invitation from God, an invitation that says, even to those of us who feel like giving up on the chaos around us and within us, "Hey, have you noticed there's a path here? Look, it starts over here. Let's take a walk together."

To help us get our bearings, this Lenten path is marked along the way, sort of the way you see those signs beside a trail in places like Shenandoah National Park. The first marker we run into today is a story from Genesis that tells us something important about this path we're on.

We think of Abraham and Sarah as the very archetypes of people who lived by faith. But when we meet them today, they are still called Abram and Sarai, and what we notice is not so much their *faith* as their *anxiety*. Here they have upped sticks and left their homeland behind on the promise—just the promise, mind you—that Yahweh is going to give them land and heirs. But there's still no concrete evidence that Yahweh is going to come through, and they're feeling just a teensy bit vulnerable. They're getting on in years. They're looking around and thinking, "Who will carry on after us?" And how many heirs do they have? None! Zip! Nada! Not a single one. God says, "Don't be afraid. I will be your shield." So Abram says to Yahweh, "Shield schmiel. Where are the children you promised us?"

I understand Abram's anxiety, and I'll bet you do, too, because in this material world, we want concrete answers--and we want them *now*. God first shows Abram the star spangled night sky and says, "Look, you will have as many descendents as that." And when Abram says, "But how do I know?" God has him to take some of his wealth, which was in livestock—a heifer, a goat, a ram, and some birds—physical things he could see and touch and count--and use them as signs of God's invisible but very real commitment. This strange ceremony is called a "covenant," and cutting the animals in half plays on language because the Hebrew term is "cut a covenant."

There is sacrifice and fear and darkness and in the end, God has made a promise God cannot back out of. And because we are descendents of Abraham and Sarah, we are also party to this unbreakable promise.

What does it mean to be in covenant with God? And just what is a covenant anyhow?ⁱⁱⁱ

Let's start with *contracts*, which most of us know something about. In a contract, one person agrees to do certain things and the other person agrees to do certain other things, usually involving an exchange of money. A contract can be between an employer and an employee, a buyer and a seller, a builder and a homeowner. The contract usually refers to a time frame: for one month's work the employee will receive so much pay; the escrow is to close within sixty days; the construction is to be completed before we are too old to enjoy the house. But at least half of any contract deals with the questions of what to do when things *go wrong*--when one party fails to perform or deadlines are not met. So the contract includes phrases like "liable," "attorney's fees," and "hold harmless." The primary concern here is agreeing who is to blame when things go wrong.

Back when Philip and I were booking performers for the cabaret we operated briefly, we became familiar with contracts with performers. The first part of the contract says that Suzy the Singer will perform for not less than 45 minutes and not more than 75 minutes each night at 9 p.m. for four nights, beginning on such and such a date. Suzy is to be paid 20% in advance and 20% following each performance. There is a clause about what to do with people who try to take pictures or make recordings of the performance. There is something about what happens if Suzy's limousine is stuck in traffic or there is a power failure during the show. And, of course, there are some scary clauses about earthquakes, civil strife, war, and acts of God. Even simple contracts can be theological statements.

The difference between a contract and a covenant is this: while contracts are concerned with the *acts of people*, a covenant is almost entirely concerned with *acts of God*; and because God has some qualities that people do not have, the terms are quite different.

Paraphrasing freely, our covenant with God goes something like this:

Herein follows a covenant, written on the heart, between God, also known as Creator, Redeemer, Holy Spirit, Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Prince of Peace, Lord of Hosts and Great God Almighty, hereinafter referred to as "God", and certain people known as the Chosen People, the Redeemed, the Children of God, the Faithful Remnant, and the Nation of Israel, hereinafter referred to as "the people".

1. God will love the people, provide for their genuine and true earthly and spiritual needs and grant them admission to the eternal Realm of God.
2. The people will honor God by loving God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength; further, they shall love their neighbors as themselves.

3. On Paragraphs 1 and 2, all other terms of this covenant are dependent. This includes, but is not limited to, all terms stated and unstated.
4. This covenant has been agreed to by God on repeated occasions in the past (see exhibits Alpha to Omega, attached) and is considered to be in effect each and every time the people consent to its provisions. There shall be no limit to the number of times God and the people may renew the covenant.
5. In the event that the people singly or severally fail to comply with the terms of this covenant, he, she, or they shall suffer from feelings of brokenness and hurt, and shall feel cut off from the love of God.
6. In the event that the people singly or severally choose not to comply with Paragraph 2, God may elect to cast them into the outer darkness where there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth. However, the people may at any time elect to renew the covenant, and, by the grace of God, be admitted into the circle of God's love. This is entirely a matter of God's discretion and is dependent upon God's good will and mercy. However, prayers may be offered at any time requesting God's mercy and forgiveness.
7. God shall be held harmless for perceived flaws in the universe. This includes, but is not limited to, infant mortality, original sin, and the extinction of the dinosaurs. The universe is offered on an "as is" basis without any warranties expressed or implied and is, by its very essence, a mystery.

This covenant is herewith renewed this day.

GOD

THE PEOPLE

Note that in this covenant, more than half of the statements concern what happens when things go wrong. Also, in every case, it is only the people who fail to comply with the terms and, no matter what, God is always willing to renew the covenant. Such a deal!

For Christians, there is a new twist to the covenant. Whenever we take communion, we hear Christ's words: "This is my blood of the new covenant . . ." In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is the sign of the *new covenant* God has made with us. When we partake of communion, we are celebrating that covenant once again.

Lent is a good time to remind ourselves of the promises we have made. Our part of the agreement is contained in Paragraph 2 of the covenant I read. Let me read it

again: *"The people will honor God by loving God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength; further, they shall love their neighbors as themselves."*

It is not easy to keep this promise. We do not make our journey of faith as solitary travelers but as a band of people held together by our covenant, sealed by the blood of Christ. And we do not make the journey all at once. Rather, like Abraham, we go on "by stages" (Genesis 12:9). We have promised to love God and love our neighbor and to help one another keep those promises. We do the best we can each day.

This is also a good time to remind ourselves of God's promise to us. A covenant with God is serious business, and sometimes it requires believing in the impossible. Just ask Sarah and Abraham, who had a child in their old age. A covenant with God is a contract in which God supplies the terms, the compensation, and does most of the work. A covenant with God requires acknowledging that the universe is given "as is," which includes pain and suffering. And, finally, a covenant with God means a determination to risk the consequences of a faith that demands all of our selves, all of the time.

But as we journey along the Lenten path we discover this strange truth: God's promise to us is not burdensome but liberating. In the new covenant we are promised fullness of life and freedom from fear. The promise can be heard in the refrain of a contemporary hymn: *"Be not afraid; I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest."*

ⁱ This sermon is the product of ongoing theological collaboration with my spouse, the Rev. Philip F. Wiehe. Most of the material on contracts and the paraphrased Covenant with God is his contribution.

ⁱⁱ *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year in the Life of Faith*, Vintage, 1999.