

## Reflection for March 3-2024 – Lent 3 - Our Covenant Inspired by Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13-22

Lenore and I are coming up to our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this summer. It is exceedingly hard to believe that much time has gone by since we took our marriage vows. The hair now on my face was on the top of my head then.

I remember the day warmly; it was one of the best times I ever had. Except for the small glitch after the Minister pronounced us Husband and Wife, and then led us off the podium. He didn't say "you can now kiss the bride," and so I didn't. I was really looking forward to that part.

I think it is a shame these days that fewer couples choose a formal ceremony to mark their union. That's not because I am fickle about couples "living together." In no way is that a problem for me. My reasoning is that some sort of "formalized service" is a covenant, and a covenant is an important thing. The vows taken and promises made are a declaration of the couple's love for each other, and their intentions to walk life's rocky road together, regardless of impediments along the way. And they profess this commitment to witnesses. Thus, it is more than "going through the motions," or an excuse to have a big party.

With a covenant of course comes obligations. Living up to obligations requires flexibility, sacrifice, understanding and patience. It also often requires forgiveness. Living a life together honouring a marital covenant as you all will know, is not an easy thing.

Lenore and my covenant have, of course, been tested over the years. We have had our most difficult times when I expressed a desire to follow more educational pursuits. It has always been "a thing" with me. In the year 2000 I wanted to do a Master's program at Royal Roads University in Sooke. Lenore wasn't thrilled, but she acquiesced when I promised this would be the last educational request I would make. You can imagine her dismay when in 2015, I expressed an interest in entering the ministry. In retrospect a fair question would be whether or not I was living up to my covenantal promises.

Our Lenten time is a time when we recognize covenanting of a different sort. We are asked to reflect on the promises we make in Christian Community and in our lives. We are asked to examine our call in Christian Ministry, taking stock of our shortfalls and pledging to commit once again to discipleship practice. Our covenant is a reminder of our call to action.

Both of our readings for this morning take us down this path and ask us if we are living our covenantal promises.

Throughout biblical history, Yahweh, God of the Hebrew people, made numerous promises with them. God made a covenant with Noah never to flood the earth again. God made a covenant with Abraham promising him he would be the father of nations. In our Exodus reading for today, Yahweh meets Moses on Mt. Sinai and makes a covenant instructing him and his people to follow a set of infamous directives we know today as the "10 Commandments."

In John's gospel that Donna shared, Jesus demonstrated his discipleship commitment in the temple. Shopkeepers, artisans, and money changers were making a mockery of the sacred place. It was a place for ritual sacrifice and prayer, not one where cattle, sheep and birds were to be kept. It wasn't a money exchange.

Jesus had a commitment, a covenant with God to honour the temple as a sanctuary. He was rightfully upset about what he saw, and so he put a stop to it. A covenant was being broken. Jesus could not stand for such a thing.

This day we travel a somewhat different path than the Hebrew people did during their flight from Egypt. And our journey is not the same as Jesus' was. We do however still have a covenantal relationship with God, Creator, and Holy Love. It is the same covenantal commitment now as was the case a few thousand years ago. But the stone tablets Moses carried down from Mt. Saini have different inscriptions. Perhaps they might read something like this.

1. There is one God; a Holy Presence that is the essence of life and love. That presence is ubiquitous and shows no favouritism.
2. God is known in all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, social standing, gender identity or economic status. God is not exclusively known by any individual or group.
3. All God's children are held equally, supported on Divine Shoulders, lifted up by Holy Hands.
4. God, comforter, and pastor is always present through our grieving, offering a life-line of compassion, hope and healing.
5. God's heart, like ours, is broken, and God weeps with us when tragedy strikes, the needy are not cared for, and a voice suffers in silence.
6. God abhors violence, deceit, dishonesty, deception, and abuse of any kind.
7. God cries out when Creation is harmed, when another species is lost, when land is plundered for more resources, when the seas are used as dumping grounds, when the skies are fouled with toxins.
8. God despairs when relationships break down, forgiveness is not practiced and the opportunity for reconciliation is lost.
9. God is angry when human selfishness and greed replace grace and empathy.
10. We are God's own. God cares and holds precious this creation, everyone and everything in it.

If we are God's own, we live in a covenantal relationship with God upholding these commandments as our own. The Hebrew people carried them on their wilderness journey. Jesus carried them through his ministry, and he passed the torch to us through his death and resurrection.

This torch however is not easy to hold. We sit in uncomfortable seats. We walk rocky roads. We get frightened. We question and doubt. So did Jesus. Lent reminds us of that. But Jesus had a covenant with God to carry out a new kin-dom reality. That is our covenant too.

Sometimes Jesus must have been encouraged. When the blind beggar could "see" again Jesus' heart would have been filled with hope. At other times he would have been bewildered. Why, he would wonder, after feeding the 5,000, why his disciples would complain they had no bread to eat? Did they not understand what the bread of life was?

Sometimes Jesus would be angry, like he was in the temple. He was angry because Yahweh's sanctuary was being dishonoured.

And certainly, Jesus was discouraged as we all are at times. How disheartened he must have been that night in the garden of Gethsemane when he prayed in anguish for the strength to do what had to be done, only to find his friends sleeping when he returned.

A covenantal relationship with God is like a marriage covenant, filled with great joy and also with significant challenge and significant disappointment.

Our joy in God is the Holy Love and Holy Promise we witness with a grandchild's birth or the return from hospital of a dear friend. Our joy is in the coming spring when creation will renew itself once again with new shoots and blossoms. All the colours of God's rainbow will be manifest once more. Our joy is the sun on our face or our hands in the soil. Our joy is a dog at play or a piano concerto.

With those joys come disappointments and discouragements. Perhaps our budget will not be balanced after all. The loss of a dear friend, family member or a member of our COF is real heartache. Our failing bodies,

our weakening eye sight and hearing. The worry about our children. Our faith helps, but it doesn't make those things go away.

Sometimes we have no avenue in which to vent our anger and frustration with global unrest, conflict and loss of innocent life. We feel inadequate, unable to make a difference in the lives of those unable to care for themselves, find adequate shelter, secure resources for sustaining food or clothing. We want to help heal the earth, but we are unsure how to do that.

As a covenant people, we want to make a difference, but we are overwhelmed and sometimes unable to sustain our energy and commitment. I expect Jesus experienced that too. I can't imagine how exhausted he must have been as he strode on to Jerusalem. But day after day, night after night, a weary Jesus walked on. This was a promise made, a covenant with God.

We are walking that path too. It is a different path but just as wearisome. There are joys and we celebrate them. There are sorrows and we grieve. There are mountains we struggle to climb, and we do our best, one small step at a time. We fall down and pick ourselves up again. To lighten our burdens, we join hands in unity when we need to. When we are exhausted, we do like Jesus did, we stop and pray. We stop and pray for reassurance.

Lenten One, be with us on our journey, give us the strength to continue in our ministry. We are called your covenant people. In our quest to serve, serve us with your guidance, your grace and your enduring love.

Amen Thanks for listening to me this morning.