

"A Lesson God Has Yet to Learn?"

Genesis 17:1-8, 15-19; Mark 8:31-9:1

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 8, 2015 – 3rd Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

A great deal of time goes by between what happens in our Old Testament lesson today and that of our Gospel reading. In Genesis we hear about a special covenant established between God and Abraham and Sarah. God chooses to deepen the Creator's relationship with **all** humanity through this couple. It is a promise that would take generations to fully bear fruit, but it was an intentional starting point.

This particular covenant was so symbolic that the two persons are even given new names. They are promised that, through them, their descendants will be many and they will always have a special relationship to the Lord. God's expectation of the people of this covenant is that they will "walk ... and be blameless."

A "covenant" is a special pact, a sacred relationship that usually relates to matters of faith. The promise to Abraham is not the only one we find in the Bible, but is evidenced in many different forms throughout the scriptures. The term "covenant" can also describe the relationship of a pastor and the people of a congregation, or to a church with its denomination, or in any special relationship involving trust and commitment.

Covenants need not be religious in nature, though they are generally solemn ones. Every four years, for example, we engage in a pact of sorts between the people of this country and one who will serve as our President. Even almost two years before we next go to the polls the line of candidates is beginning to form. This is the most important elective office we have and it requires careful consideration.

Not all Presidents have been universally praised. The covenant has sometimes been shaky. Some who were initially popular quickly lost favor with the electorate once in office. Of these, a few have been viewed more favorably later as time has vindicated them. A prime example might be Andrew Johnson.

Andrew Johnson attempted to carry through on Lincoln's policy of reconciliation with the states of the Confederacy. Johnson was sincerely committed to healing the wounds of the recent war, though many felt that the Southern states should continue to pay heavily for their treasonous acts.

Johnson advocated for reconciliation because he believed it to be both the right thing to do and in the best interests of the country. He considered this to be part of his covenant of office with the people of the United States. The majority in Congress did not agree with him and sanctioned him by passing a bill of impeachment in 1868. The demand for revenge was strong and unrelenting. Johnson was seen as a traitor for his stance.

Yet history has largely exonerated Andrew Johnson. His removal from office failed by a single vote and now, looking back, it's clear that his policy of reconciliation was both sound and

right. The ordeal of Andrew Johnson is a classic example of what can easily happen to a President. His job, you see, is not simply to think about the most popular course of action for the moment; his job is also to consider the future well-being of the country. The true leader does not sacrifice tomorrow's good for present expediency. That is his covenant with the people.

Coming back to our scriptures now, our New Testament lesson picks up the story of Jesus and his disciples as they travel from village to village in the vicinity of Caesarea. He asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" They answer variously what they have heard as they have been about their work. Often people have expressed the thought that Jesus is one of the great religious leaders of the past come back to life. Some even think the soul of John the Baptist has been transferred to him.

None of the answers are, of course, adequate nor true. So Jesus asks them more specifically, "But who do **you** say that I am?" You can imagine him looking from face to face until Peter breaks the silence and says, "You are the Messiah."

Whether he speaks for all or only himself, this affirmation marks a new understanding of Jesus. He is not just some religious leader, some important rabbi, but the promised one of Israel. In acknowledging him by this title they recognize him as the long-awaited Savior foretold in the Hebrew scriptures, God's covenant now fully manifest.

Jesus does not deny Peter's identification, but instead tells them what it means to be the Christ and to carry out the sacred responsibility. He recognizes and accepts the suffering that must go with his role as Savior. However he may be lauded by some as he enters Jerusalem, he will be persecuted there.

Perhaps, ironically, it is also Peter who takes Jesus aside after he speaks about what the future will bring. Peter tries to argue Jesus out of what he has just told them. He was unwilling to accept this concept of servanthood because it went against commonly held ideas of the Messiah. It also made no sense to him.

We're not told the exact words of his rebuke, but I can imagine him saying, "No, it can't be. You have a mission to fulfill, Jesus, that cannot be cut short in this manner. Don't say things like this. Be reasonable and deny this fate."

The implication here is that the disciple knows better than his master. Peter tries to correct Jesus' interpretation of his mission and destiny. He tries to make the case that, in this instance, he knows what is best.

Jesus replies forcefully to Peter, "Don't tempt me. Do not tell me to choose evil over right. I must be ready to carry through with what I have to do. I can't give in to the expediency you want. I have to keep my eyes focused on the future. My place is to fulfill God's intention and promise to humanity."

Jesus would not be dissuaded. It was a difficult future to face, but one that he was prepared to accept because of his part in God's Covenant. There was no other way.

You know, one lesson God hasn't seemed to learn is that you've got to find short cuts in life. You've got to consider now to be more important than later. You've got to think immediate gain over principle. Peter tried to teach it to Jesus, but then maybe he just used the wrong approach.

Certainly one of the hardest things for people to do is to give up short-term advantage for long-term good. Often we see no farther than the next few minutes or the next few hours or the next few days in the decisions we make. We want to deal with our problems now and get them over with. We like to think in terms of immediate conclusions rather than later consequences.

Government, for example, seems to live by two premises: might makes right and quick is slick. We love to debate highly complex issues in our legislative chambers, then throw together some simplistic answer which is really no solution at all. Everyone walks away claiming victory, but the problem isn't really resolved. A bill may be passed, but it will mean nothing if it is only done in the name of expediency.

Business, too, has often been a leading proponent of this kind of thinking. If you want to maximize profits in the next quarter, fire some loyal employees, contract out for production, and expect a favorable response to your next report. What happens in the long run won't be a problem, at least for now. More drastic action can then be deferred to another day, which will surely come.

And when are we guilty of expediency at the personal level? How often do we put convenience before need? How often do we take the quick way out rather than choose the better but longer way?

In comparison to us, the Lord doesn't seem to move very fast. Back as far as with Abraham we see that covenant was something that would only evolve slowly and deliberately—in God's time—until the moment was right for Christ.

When the Messiah did come, and explained God's plan of redemption for the world, a disciple took exception to it. He insisted that this was not an expedient way to set up the kingdom of heaven on earth. It wasn't a practical way to go about it. Still, human logic failed to dissuade divine intention.

In Lent we are reminded that God's wisdom is greater than our own. We can see only the immediate; God can fathom eternity. God has a holy plan for our lives born out of covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and sealed with Christ's blood. Jesus stands forever as the one who refused the temptation of compromise to complete his mission on our behalf. We think of this increasingly as, once again, we move toward Holy Week.