Springfield Presbyterian Church

February 21st, 2021

First Sunday of Lent

Creating a Lenten Covenant

1. Reading

In our reading today, we hear a familiar story, one that has often been quoted or illustrated

in children’s Bibles or served well for a Sunday School lesson. One of the reasons this is the case is that the story is filled with imagery, narrative, and our own delight when we see a rainbow in the sky. We can see the animals, going two by two, into a boat-like structure, and we can see the story out loud.

In the selection we hear today, we hear the word ‘covenant’ repeatedly. The Scriptures are filled with covenants, from the one between God and Noah, to God and Abraham, and so on. Outside of the Biblical world though, we don’t often hear the word ‘covenant’ – so what does it mean?

A covenant is a promise, but even something more sacred that is held between God and a person or God’s collective people. It is not a law that is rigid or commanded, it isn’t a contract. But a covenant is a solemn agreement between God and God’s people that is based upon relationship.

One of the key aspects is that a covenant doesn’t happen outside of God’s merciful nature. You may come up with a group covenant as you work in a team or rules or norms, but the true nature of covenant always points back to God. God is the one offering the covenant and it is then ours to respond to, it is an invitation to agree that each party will hold something as sacred, holy, and profoundly important.

The Rev. Eugene Peterson puts it in modern day language when he says, “this kingdom of God life is not a matter of waking up each morning with a list of chords or an agenda to be tended to, left on our bedside table by the Holy Spirit for us while we slept. We wake up already immersed in a large story of creation and covenant, of Israel and Jesus, the story of Jesus and the stories that Jesus told. We let ourselves be formed by these formative stories…”

In other words – we do not need to be scholars to be covenant builders, for we’ve seen covenant time and time again. It’s within us, it is innate, it is who we are. While creating a covenant for the Lenten season might seem like a tall order, the truth is that we already have everything we need for the journey.

1. Lent

Lent is often seen as a somber time of self-reflection and introspection, and to some

extent, it is, particularly as we face the reality of those last days of Christ’s journey to the cross. Yet, Lent also offers a stronger invitation each year that no other season does – an invitation to confess our sins, be affirmed by God’s mercies, and then to act. It is an invitation to slow down, to think about who God is calling us to be and who we are as God’s people. It is an invitation that you can accept or decline, for God’s hand does not force, but gently affirms that you are welcome, particularly during this time, to closer relationship with God and God’s community of believers.

The question that kept on drawing me in was the practicality of this covenant in COVID times. While we are hopefully looking towards a future where we can more safely regather, we are still in the scattered trauma of the pandemic. We faced Lent last year, completely scared, facing unknowns, and being essentially forced into our homes with the broadcast telling us what to do. This Lent, we are tired, we are weary – for we’ve spent and continue to spend time indoors, our smiles are covered by masks, and hugs and signs of affection between family and friends are diminished. The fact that we are here, today, the fact that we live and breathe is a miracle on its own, so to challenge you to something in Lent just seems…mean?

Yet, maybe it isn’t. Again, there’s that invitation to live out Lent in these times we are experiencing. Often, folks will give up something for Lent and that is a true and valid option, so that when Easter comes, our gratitude for what we gave up is greater amplified. Yet, we have been going through what feels like a year-long Lent, where we have given up some of the most basic things to some of the most profound. If you want to give something up this season, if you feel that is where God is calling you, then follow the calling – but if you are craving something different in this season, know that you have some options.

Lent provides a certain season, not only of invitation, but of renewal. We are called to renew our priorities and to live differently because of the love we have received from Christ. This renewal can come in a myriad of forms, but I would encourage you to add something that you love into your Lent and be intentional about it. You’ve heard the saying, “Happy wife, happy life” – there’s some truth in “happy human, happy God” – because when we are living graciously and gratefully, when we are living into the happiness and joy God has blessed us with, God also rejoices with us.

Now, I’m not saying that if you like to do something negative for thirty minutes, do it for another thirty. No, the action needs to be inherently positive, removed from guilt or shame, and it’s even better when it is something that ties you more deeply to the awareness of God around you. It doesn’t have to be rocket science. It can be a walk around the block times two, or playing the piano for fifteen minutes longer, or taking a run (again, only if you like it). It’s beneficial because the more we invest in practices we enjoy, the more mindful we become, and the more agile and flexible we are in our understanding of how God enters our lives day to day.

1. Crafting the Covenant

The call this week is to seek to make a covenant between God and you – I don’t need to

know what it is unless you want me to hold you accountable. It can be a rough scratch covenant – a sentence and that sentence might change over the next 40 days. It can be anything you want it to be, as in, you are not graded on who has the best covenant ever.

However you name it, whatever that covenant looks like, may it fill you with a deeper sense of God in your life right here and right now and may you enjoy the practice. Take time to pray, but again, it doesn’t need to be the perfect covenant, whatever that might be. And may this blessed promise that you share between you and your Savior remind you of God’s mercies daily and the profound love found in covenantal promises from Noah’s time up to now. Amen.