



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent
St. Mark's on the Campus
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I WANT TO RETURN US FOR A FEW MINUTES to our first reading from Genesis.

THE LORD TELLS ABRAM, who is to become Abraham, what appears to be an impossibility: that he and his elderly wife, Sarah, after years of having no children, are going to produce children and be ancestors to many generations of faithful people. We won't get into how they might feel about becoming parents at an advanced age; I know how I would feel!

Although Abram doesn't understand how the Lord's going to pull off this remarkable feat, the story tells us that, "Abram believed the Lord"—Abram trusted God—"and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.... And on that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram."

We hear the word again during the words of institution in the Eucharist: "This is my blood of the new *covenant*." This time a covenant cut in the body of our Lord Jesus Christ; a covenant consistent with the one in our reading, in that it is initiated by God—and extended to all who believe the Lord, who trust God, no matter how remarkable the realities we embrace in that trust. It's different in that the cost of the covenant, the cost of trusting those of us with whom the covenant is made is, in a sense, far higher to God.

It's a cost that God pays willingly, lovingly, as God always has since creating this world. It's a reminder to us all that in covenant relationships, there are always costs to be paid, sometimes very dear.

One of the places that covenant relationships arise most explicitly today is in marriages. In the Episcopal marriage liturgy, we use the very word, covenant, when we proclaim that “the bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation” In other words, the covenantal nature of marriage is grounded in the nature of reality as God has created it. Many of us would say *all* human relationships are called to reflect that covenant, and that part of the calling of the church understands is to display that reality clearly among us, especially in relationships of intense intimacy such as those with our spouses and other life partners.

Carol and I are coming up on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in June. You’re not married 25 years without getting to know someone pretty darn well! Poor Carol!

You’re also not married 25 years without practicing loving forgiveness, patience with one another, some healthy self sacrifice, some placing of the needs of the other first. And as with most relationships, those dimensions change over the years. Carol and I were married fairly young, in our early twenties, so we were still growing and changing in many ways. As time has passed, forgiveness, patience, self-sacrifice have all become more subtle but no less real, just as the joy of our relationship has likewise become more subtle—but no less real, as time and life and love have mellowed us into one, while still remaining two. I think I have a new image for the Trinity!

Isn’t it the same dynamic in our relationship with God? I remember how, soon after I returned both to the church and to God after several years away, I experienced a flush of intensity to the relationship, not exactly the same as being in love with Carol in those early periods of our relationship, but similarly intense. By now, as the years have passed, my relationship with God has quieted, calmed, just as my relationship with Carol has. There are still moments of intense feeling and experience, flushes of love, in both relationships. But the stretches of steady, trustworthy presence are equally important, and ultimately

more satisfying. And in my relationship with God, I imagine that those stretches of mutual trusting are probably just as important for God as they are for me. They form the core of the covenant we share, just as they do between Carol and me.

All relationships that reflect the covenant that's at the heart of creation—whether a holy partnership with another person, a friendship, or the relationships between two strangers on the street—they all involve mutual trust, and mutual responsibility to serve one another. It's when that trust is broken, when that responsibility is dropped, or ignored—that's when the covenant is tested, and both parties either reaffirm it, or...Or what? Are we ever really able to leave a covenant once made?

Certainly we can leave a marriage. But that doesn't negate the covenantal nature of the relationship that exists among all human beings, or even between those two persons, even if the nature of that covenant has changed.

We live within the covenant that's at the heart of creation all the time, whether it be with God or one another.

We can deny that covenant, and too often we do. But we can't live outside of it any more than we can live outside the bodies that God has given us.

And the bottom line is that God continually reasserts that covenant with us. At baptism, we enter into the specific covenant God has with the people of God, the covenant in which we assert that we are going to live into that loving, grace-filled relationship that is at the heart of reality, and that God will be there helping us every step of the way.

Every time we break that covenant, every time we stop trusting God, every time we act as if we know better than God knows, every time we deny justice to another beloved child of God, every time we realize what we have done and acknowledge the ways things are—that

living in mutual, trusting relationship is the only way we can live in the world God has created—every time, God welcomes us back into that covenant.

Lent is finally about reasserting the covenant that God has created this world to hold and live into and which God has revealed through various faith traditions, including in our Lord Jesus. During Lent, we acknowledge publicly that we blow it on a regular basis, that we lose sight of the way God has created this world— and that we need restoration; we need God to help us restore things to the way that God intends, in our personal lives and in our corporate life. And we remember that God promises to do nothing less: nothing less than restore us all.