

What Does God's Covenant Mean for Today? 1 Lent B

The sign of the covenant that God made with humanity is a Rainbow. It is a reminder of the relationship God desires with the world. He could have destroyed it many times already. While men put up parking lots and other barriers between creation and themselves, God puts up only a rainbow. Efforts to destroy God's image and to control human relationships have been futile. Man has been forgiven this temptation to "play God" over and over again. The bow in the sky should be a reminder to man of his part of the covenant. Yet the rainbow is not enough of a reminder. Man continues to want his way!

Another sign of God's covenant has developed from a bow in the sky, to an ark and then to a wooden cross. Jesus Christ was the culmination of God's covenant with us through His life and with His death. God has tried time and again to get our attention throughout history with signs of His love for the world. "God so loved the world..." it says in John 3:16 that He gave His firstborn Son as a sign of His continued love – an everlasting love that won't quit despite efforts to divorce ourselves from His will. In Jesus, God united the flesh and the Spirit. In Jesus, humanity and God are joined together and by His cross, the chasm between the two is bridged so that we may be one with God.

Imagine a new sign in God's sky that can bind us together – a cross with a weeping Christ. Every time there is an act of human tragedy the sign should appear in the hearts of men and be felt in all hemispheres. This sign of the cross could be a sign that would unite all countries. All religions and every eye that sees it would know that God desires to renew a right relationship with us, if we would only meet Him half way. In many places people believe that signs of the Blessed Mother in the sky have been given as a warning to change our ways.

In this time of national anxiety, Americans need not put their hope in any one mortal man; instead we should hope for many to return to their trust in God. Fear must be replaced by faith and spiritual strength. Rioting in the streets reported in the news must be replaced by respect for each other.

To use the metaphor, "So much is riding on your tires," there is also much riding on whether we will fully embrace God in our lives. Jesus' open arms on the Cross await us. That's where my hope is these days. May I not misplace that hope in anything else – not in a system that fosters greed or in the hands of politicians, but in hands that foster a saving embrace.

The psalm appointed for the day concludes:
He guides the humble in doing right
and teaches His way to the lowly.

All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness
to those who keep His covenant and His testimonies.

Keeping His covenant and His testimonies are the faithful response to God's love. It is the way we thank God for teaching us His ways and remembering His compassion and love. With His signs in the heavens, God reminds us that He will not destroy man as He did in the past. And yet, all of these signs of covenant require something from us. They require man to be faithful and live up to his part of the agreement.

A fourth sign after the rainbow, the ark, and the cross is the covenant of baptism. Baptism according to Peter's letter is "an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...."

A good conscience helps me sleep at night. It does not just know that I have not hurt anyone or broken any major commandments. A good conscience is a window to the soul. It is a window that God uses to show us how we are getting along with life. It is a means for us to see how He can strengthen our covenants with Him and to follow the signs He has given us on the path of life. When that window is cloudy or a film of dirt dims the light, the Holy Spirit, if welcomed in, comes with baptismal "Windex" so we can see clearly to follow those signs God has given. God will guide our way through the valley of sin and darkness. He will guide us on our path even when tempted by the evil One.

Temptation like conflict is a constant in this life. There is always an opportunity to allow evil to compromise our values and weaken our faith in God. The evil One is hard at work to put filters over our eyes so things look rosy or peaceful – or that temptations "don't look so bad".

A good snapshot of temptation is the one given to us by James' letter: "***But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it;*** then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" James 1:14-15.

This picture helps us see temptation as an acorn that starts as desire, giving birth to a sapling and that sapling when it is a giant oak, no longer can be uprooted. The only way to rid us of the temptation then is to cut down the tree.

Imagine if Jesus had given in to His tempter? The temptation to fall to the wild beasts of power and greed seem all too familiar. God sent angels to wait on Jesus. There are times that I know my angels must be linebackers ready to throw a block to my tempters. (If only I would stop running in front of them and instead run behind them!)

The gospel gives us a "sign" to help with these temptations. It is a reminder of our journey with the Risen Christ. Like Jesus, we are affirmed in baptism by the voice of God. We, like Jesus, are the Beloved. We are confirmed as God's sons and daughters by His word. We sense a voice that says, "I am well pleased!"

And then like Jesus, the Spirit drives us into the wilderness for endurance training! We may think it's unfortunate and we pray that the training does not go for forty days and the wild beasts are not too big. We all want an easy life, but true strength is not built by a "cushy existence".

I went out to the 29 Palms Desert for training with the Marines one time and that was just for 21 days. That might seem like a long time to be in training. Yet before that I experienced nearly 6 months away from my family and I had to depend only on fellow Christians and God to be my strength. And there are those that have been going through some sort of endurance training for years!

We are taught that God will not give us more "training" than we can endure. The scripture elsewhere says that God can not be tempted, nor does he test us to tempt us.

He trains us so we can be fit for the fight. He provides the axe to cut down the temptations that get as big as oak trees and out of control. If we call on Him to fill us with the Holy Spirit each day, we will have the strength to keep our covenant with Him, no matter what goes on around us. MAY GOD'S WORD HAVE HIS WAY WITH US! Amen.

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness." Ephesians 6:12-14