



In Cycle B Lent, the first readings from the Jewish Scripture focus on the Covenants that God entered into first with the patriarchs, Noah and Abraham, and then with the Israelites. The fourth Sunday's readings underscore God's steadfast fidelity in restoring covenant practice to Israel which they had lost in their unfaithfulness. The fifth Sunday proclaims Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant written on human hearts. **The Liturgy Committee, therefore, has decided that 'Covenant' should be the overarching theme for Lent this year.**

What is meant by Covenant?

The concept of covenant was not unique to Israel; rather it was common practice for the monarchs of the biblical period to enter into several sorts of covenant (*biritu* in Akkadian) with their peers and subjects. In one type, generally known as the suzerainty treaty, the king bound the people he conquered (and therefore owned) to a set of obligations, which the king unilaterally defined. In return the king promised nothing, except – implicitly- his own protection, given in return for the subjects' loyalty and trust.

Another type of covenant was the parity treaty. In these, a set of mutual obligations was defined and accepted by two equal parties. A third sort of pact, the promissory grant, occurred when there was inequality between the parties, and the king alone took on the obligation of performing stipulated acts on behalf of his inferior out of sheer benevolence. You can find all three types of covenant in the Jewish Scriptures:

At Sinai, the suzerainty model is borrowed (cf. Ex. 19-20). If Israel will 'obey Me faithfully, and keep my covenant,' it shall become God's chosen 'kingdom of priests and holy nation' (Ex. 19:5), uniquely enjoying his

presence and protection. The *brit*, initiated by God, binds Israel to him- and, equally significant, to each other.

Deuteronomy's reiteration of the covenant follows the parity form precisely, adopting even the standard six –part structure: preamble, historical prologue, detailed stipulations, provision for deposit and/or reading the text, invocation of divine witnesses (in this case, heaven and earth), and, finally the recitation of blessings and curses. (Deut. 5-11).

Noah (Gen. 9:8), Abraham (Gen.15:18, 17:4), and David (II Sam. 7) are the privileged recipients of promissory covenants. God binds himself to be their patron and benefactor. Like a lover, he accepts the partner just as he is...

From Eisen.

What made the biblical covenant unique was who the involved parties were. Before Israel, no people on earth had made pacts or treaties with God. At Sinai, God demands allegiance, fidelity, and trust as Israel's God and sovereign. A terrifying set of demands God puts on Israel, for sure, but at the same time, being party to the Covenant brings God into the human camp. God becomes accessible in that the people know with confidence what God is asking of them. God goes farther still, submitting to the seeming indignity of human conversation, even negotiating with Moses to pardon the Israelites in their wandering.

God moves unbelievably to a parity treat in the Torah's Book of Deuteronomy: if Israel will accept the yoke of the Torah, God will make them a holy nation.

When one party to a covenant is God, the nature of the covenant radically changes. Rabbinic teaching calls the Torah God's wedding gift to Israel through which God binds God's very self to the people.

The biblical covenant is a contract woven into a tapestry of love. God, in Bonaventure's words describing the Trinity, must be 'self-diffusive goodness marked by a community of persons in love.' Thus the covenants noted in these Cycle B Lenten readings build on each other as God lovingly and faithfully interacts with an increasingly developed human experience.

In Genesis, Noah and his sons are bound to God in a promissory covenant (Genesis 9:1-15). God outlines terms under which all people should live to avoid the evil that brought on the flood. Rabbinic theology elaborates Noah's covenant in the doctrine of the seven Noachide laws, which are binding on all humanity. The next crisis, the arrogance of power of the generation of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11), proves that the covenant with

Noah is not an adequate defense against evil. A more fully expanded intervention is required of God in the form of specific guidance of mankind through revelation. The first act in the renewed struggle against evil is God's call to Abraham to create a nation in whose descendants 'all the families of the earth shall bless themselves' (Gen.12:3)... Israel's redemption from Egyptian bondage and the Exodus underscore the view that the nation entirely owes its existence and survival to God, and therefore properly belongs to him and should be bound to him in covenant at Sinai as a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6) Given the Torah with its numerous commandments and prohibitions, Israel is afforded adequate resources with which to resist the corruption of evil. In light of this theological scenario, the chief purpose for the revelation of the Torah is to arm mankind against sin.

From Haberman

In Deuteronomy (30:19), God says: "I call on heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life..."

St. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Romans that the Law, the Torah, had been so drained of its spirit and heart by teachers who focused on its letter and detail that for some it was no longer a 'defense against evil.' Rather for some it had become a source of sin: the protection had become the trap. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel noted the same thing in the twentieth century:

When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than the voice of compassion- its message becomes meaningless.

As we listen to the story of God's covenants throughout Lent, we need to ponder this all too human tendency of ours to redefine God's covenant of love on our own self-serving terms into something lifeless and impoverished. God wants the covenant written on our hearts- as Jeremiah will tell us this Lent- so it may be vibrant, life-giving, and usher in the kingdom. It is the task Jesus left us.

References:

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