

MARCH 1, 2009
LENT 1
“COVENANT: LIFE’S TRUE WAY”

For our opening prayer this morning I’d like to use the words of a sixth century Latin plainsong chant for Lent that somehow, inexplicably, failed to make the cut into our new ELW hymnal

*O Sun of justice, Jesus Christ,
Dispel the darkness of our hearts,
Till your blest light makes nighttime flee
And brings the joys your day imparts.*

*In this our “time acceptable”
Touch ev’ry heart with sorrow, Lord,
That **turned from sin, renewed** by grace,
We may press on toward love’s reward.*

*The day, your day, in beauty dawns
When in your light earth blooms anew;
Led back again to life’s true way,
May we, forgiv’n, rejoice in you. Amen.*

I love that phrase, “**led back again to life’s true way.**” There’s a single word we just heard from Jesus’ lips in our Gospel reading that means just that—to be “led back again to life’s true way”—a kind of old-fashioned word that we church-going types identify especially with this forty-day season of the church year we call Lent. Can you guess what it is?

Last Wednesday evening we entered upon this holy season with our neighbors from Westwood Hills Congregational Church as we engaged in that peculiar Christian practice of having our foreheads smudged with ashes in the sign of the cross as we heard intoned over us the not-exactly-cheerful words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return”—the very words spoken by God to Adam and Eve as they were sent packing from the Garden of Eden. At noon on Wednesday in the plaza outside Schoenberg Hall up on the UCLA campus, let me tell you, it was a very sobering experience to see students and staff present themselves to receive the smudge of the cross, and to bear

their ashen sign—a most counter-cultural thing to do—out into the midst of campus.

“**Repentance**” is the familiar, old-fashioned Lenten word I’m looking for, a word that in Greek literally means “to change one’s mind” but in the Hebrew word that lies behind it means even more literally and simply to “return” or to “turn around.” And so you see that the 1500 year old Latin hymn of the church has it just right, “led back again to life’s true way.”

For Lent is the church’s season of **turning** and **returning**. Even here in southern California where we’re blessed with pretty much year round sun we too experience the lengthening of the day—or **lenckening** as the old Anglo-Saxons used to pronounce it, which is the origin of our English word “Lent” which became long ago another word for Spring.

But if repentance—turning and returning—of the sun and of our lives—is the primary image of this season of Lent, another word that will dominate our readings, and especially our Hebrew scripture readings, these coming weeks

of Lent is the word that names what we are invited to **return to**, “life’s true way,” as the Lenten chant sings of it, namely God’s “covenant” or “promise.” We particularly think of the covenant—the promise—that God made with us in Holy Baptism, as “life’s true way,” into which our baptisms lead. And so, in a very real sense, it is the covenant God made with us in baptism **toward** which we repent, toward which we turn and return, which suggests that we, in some sense, have already been there, somehow, sometime, someplace and that this returning to the covenant is in some sense a returning to our starting place, perhaps even in an important sense, a “**homecoming**,” as we say.

Our Hebrew Scripture reading for today from the Noah-saga in Genesis uses the word “**covenant**,” by my count, seven times in nine short verses. No this isn’t that part of the Noah story we all learned to love as kids, that Bill Cosby had such fun with years ago, that the TV ad of a several years ago used to sell insurance,

or something of the sort. Do you remember that commercial where an old, bearded Noah is depicted as taking inventory of the two-by-two denizens of the ark, so preoccupied in his census-taking that he absent-mindedly swats a mosquito, immediately, if I remember rightly, suspecting he's messed up God's plans while bringing a sly chuckle to us viewers. I'll never figure out how that's supposed to make me want to buy insurance—or whatever they're selling--but even the likes of Noah can be brought to life in the service of advertising, I guess.

Anyway, today's excerpt from the Noah story is “post-diluvium”—a word I don't often get to work into my sermons—meaning, the time “after the flood.” For, the flood was, in a sense, God's own act of “repentance” for ever having created humanity in the first place. Humanity so grieved God because of its evil and violent ways that “*the Lord was sorry for making humanity,*” Genesis says. Yet somehow the Creator had found Noah to be a righteous and blameless man—how and why we're not

told, he just **was**—and so Yahweh decides to make a fresh start with Noah and his immediate kin, and two of every kind of animal and mosquito and so on, who became inhabitants of the ark that Noah was ordered to build—to the hilarity of his neighbors.

Do you remember, by the way, how long God’s torrential rains flooded the earth? That’s right, forty days and forty nights which of course reminds us of Jesus’ forty day sojourn in the wilderness—and of Israel’s forty years of wilderness wandering—and of Moses’ forty days atop Mt. Sinai as he received the tablets of stone from Yahweh—and so on. “40” as a number of great and symbolic scriptural significance has its beginning here with the Noah story.

But essentially what we hear today is the story of God’s making a promise to Noah, a “berith” in Hebrew which we translate as “covenant” in English, which, Yahweh tells Noah, “I am establishing with you and your descendents after you, and (notice this!) with

every living creature that is with you. A covenant is a “promissory relationship” initiated by God into which a partner—really a “junior partner”—is, in a sense, made the recipient, in this case, Noah on behalf of all creation. Next week we’ll see God establishing such a covenant relationship with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants—who, in effect, will become the people of Israel. And a week later we’ll encounter Yahweh “making covenant” with Moses on the mountaintop during their years of wilderness wandering, and on the last Sunday of Lent we’ll hear the prophet Jeremiah prophesy of a “new covenant” that will be written upon our hearts, which, of course, each week we gather around table to celebrate this “new covenant” by eating bread and drinking wine as Jesus told us to do “in remembrance of me.” So for us, in a sense, this Lent will be a journey into the very heart of what “covenant” is all about, this God-initiated promissory relationship into which God not so much invites us as simply if mysteriously “incorporates” us.

Notice that Noah didn't really have anything to say about whether he wanted to be a part of this covenant with God, the recipient of God's promise. Notice the **declarative, performative** language of Yahweh, meaning language that by its very speaking does what it says it does, creates what it says it does, like saying, "I do" at a wedding—making the marriage happen by a simple exchange of promises. "*As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you,*" Yahweh says to Noah... "*this is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature... between me and all flesh that is on the earth...*" The great I AM WHO I AM God creates covenant, gives the divine Word, makes promises, establishes relationship and we are incorporated into it by divine fiat, by divine say-so—no ifs, ands or buts about it. There's no word at least in this first encounter with God's covenant about our "choice" or "decision" in the matter, or even about what our response is to be, about any quibbles that Noah may have had with the nature of God's promise.

Because, you see, it's **God's** promise that Genesis is talking about—God's promise **with** Noah. And notice, by the way, what we often forget or ignore, that the rainbow which Yahweh says "shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" is **not** intended as a **reminder to Noah** and to us his human descendents and inheritors of God's promise. Rather, Yahweh says, "*When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living thing that is on the earth.*" You gotta love that Yahweh, don't you!?! It's my signature on the covenant to remind me of my promise, Yahweh in effect is saying, so that I won't forget when I get angry with you humans the next time—and the next—and the next. The rainbow's the string tied around my divine finger to hold me to my promise, Yahweh is saying. The rainbow, friends, isn't about us, it's not for us. It's about God and for God!

Speaking of divine reminders written in the sky, I hope you noticed how our Gospel reading

for today began in the first chapter of Mark where we left off back there near the beginning of the new year when we celebrated Baptism of our Lord Sunday. In a way, that voice of affirmation that Jesus heard as he came up out of the waters of the Jordan, having submitted himself to the waters of repentance and return that John promised, that Voice is the same Voice that Noah hears today in our OT reading and that Abraham will hear next week, and Moses the week after, that promise-making, covenant declaring voice which simply does what it says it will do: “*You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” The same Voice in almost the same words we heard last week on Transfiguration Sunday declaring “*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.*”

There, finally, is a word of something we can do in response to the covenant-creating, promise-making Voice. We are to “listen to him”—to Jesus, the “Beloved Son.” Something we can do? Listen? Is that all? The Voice

speaks and we listen. And then what? What are we to **do**? What can we **do**?

Today's Gospel reading concludes, "*Now Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*" It seems so little, even trivial, almost an old, superstitious ritual. But Jesus began with baptism, as did the church of the time of I Peter and so do we with the church of all times and places. And so we too begin with baptism—with that cosmic flood contained in a bowl that first drowns us and then saves us—like Noah's ark—a dousing and a drowning to which we **return**, to which we **repent**, each new day, Luther taught us, and so are "led back again to life's true way." Lent—the season of repentance—begins by returning to the promise—the covenant—of our baptism into Christ.

Today, March 1, just happens to be the day on which the Church commemorates the life and witness of George Herbert, a younger

contemporary of William Shakespeare and John Donne, who died on this day in 1633 just short of his fortieth birthday. Herbert a graduate of Cambridge and member of a prominent English family was elected to Parliament at the tender age of 30 but abandoned his political career by being ordained a priest in the Church of England and settling into life as a country parson about which he wrote a famous guidebook of sorts entitled “A Priest to the Temple.” But Herbert’s greatest claim to fame is his poetry, among the finest in the English language rivaling that of Shakespeare and his friend Donne. Among his best known and loved words are those set to music so beautifully by Ralph Vaughan Williams which we’ll now join in singing, “Come My Way, My Truth, My Life,” # 816 in ELW.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.