

Genesis 9: 8-17
Psalm 25: 1-9
I Peter 3: 18-22
St. Mark 1: 9-15

Lent I 2024.

“This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds.”

Genesis 9: 17

I would like to begin this morning, not from scripture, but from an event which almost all of us have either participated in ourselves, or observed – weddings... Weddings. The core of a Christian marriage ceremony is not the legal signing of the register, nor the effort that goes into the bridal gown or the Church decor. The core of the liturgy are the *vows*, which are offered by the couple to each other. The common Anglican liturgy offers this vow:

I take you to be my wife/ husband,
to have and to hold
from this day forward;
for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish
for the rest of our lives,
according to God’s holy law.
This is my solemn vow.

The officiating priest doesn’t “make” the marriage, but *declares* what has taken place. “I *declare* that they are husband and wife,” reads the B.A.S...

In a Christian marriage, the members of the congregation are not observers, like an audience watching a good show... Rather, members of the congregation at a marriage service are fellow worshippers... Witnesses undertake a commitment themselves to support the couple, and to appreciate even more deeply our own vows... Later in the liturgy, the litany includes:

May N and N so live together that the strength of their love may enrich our common life and become a sign of your faithfulness [...]
May those who have witnessed these vows find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed...

Let’s notice that this understanding of marriage is very different from modern Canadian culture!

Many Canadians simply view a marriage as a private agreement between 2 individuals. The classical Christian teaching is that these vows, this covenant, is by 2 people *within* the community of believers. We're called to support one another, and pray for each other...

Here's a practical illustration about how we can support someone else's marriage. Let's say a young man or woman expresses frustration that their spouse doesn't pull the full weight of caring for the children. A gossipy reply might be, "You made a lousy choice with that one;" or even worse, "They're all like that – they're just interested in sex and their TV remote..." A more helpful response might be, I suggest, "Would you like me to watch the kids for an hour, so you can take a walk together?" or "Here's something I do or say if I think my partner isn't noticing my needs..." Perhaps we might pray privately for the couple... We get the idea. Christian marriage is within the context of the community... Whether we are single or married ourselves, we can encourage and guide and support...

(If I may say so, some of the international students who are part of our common life are married, but their spouses and maybe kids are part-way across the world. That's not easy on any relationship. Please take time to hold people up in prayer. God knows...)

The marriage vows are called "vows" or "solemn promises" or the "marriage covenant..." "Covenant" is a faith-word in origin... A Covenant is not a legal document – that's what's signed in the marriage register... A Covenant is a free agreement between 2 parties, about their relationship with one another. A Covenant is a free agreement, willingly and joyfully entered into by both parties...

(Some of us may remember the old musical *Oklahoma!* For those who do, do we remember when the travelling salesman begins kissing the farmer's daughter? They are caught by the farmer, who then gets out his shotgun, and insists that they get married. The scene is funny. But it's not a Christian marriage!... The young salesman isn't getting married because he wants to spend the rest of his life with the young woman. Instead, he's afraid of getting in trouble with her father!... A Covenant is a free choice... In the same kind of way, in the past, if a young woman got pregnant outside of marriage, there was enormous cultural pressure for the couple to get married, even if the relationship wasn't healthy. Please don't get me wrong. I'm all in favour of marriage, and for all children to be loved and cared for. But I believe pressuring people into marriage when they are incompatible or immature just makes things worse...)

A Covenant is a free agreement between 2 parties... Now let's look at today's first reading, from Genesis 9. The context of the reading is that Noah and his family and the animals and creatures have all survived the great flood. Then there is a Covenant, initiated by God himself (God always take the initiative first). God promises that a flood of this kind will never happen again. God gives humanity a sign of his Covenant – a reminder of God's promise. It is a rainbow... Genesis 9: 11-17:

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.'

God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

So, this Covenant is between God and humanity, a reassurance of God's eternal promise to care for us...

This Covenant relationship is not the only one in the Bible. Of course, there is God's covenant relationship between God himself and Abraham and his descendants. Genesis 17: 7:

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

The sign of *this* Covenant between God and his people was the practice of circumcision of Jewish males... It's absolutely core to Jewish identity that they are in a Covenant relationship with God, among the nations... The language around the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai is Covenant language... In the same kind of way, many of the Old Testament prophets aren't foretelling the *future*, but are calling on the nation to renew the Covenant relationship with the Lord their God alone... For example, Hosea 8: 1 (perhaps my favourite prophet):

Set the trumpet to your lips!
One like a vulture is over the house of the Lord,
because they have broken my covenant, and transgressed my law.

Christians understand we are in a *new* covenant relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. On the night he was betrayed, in the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus said,

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another (John 13: 34)."

At the same meal, the Lord Jesus said these words: “And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood (Luke 22: 20)...’ Jesus has instituted a new relationship between God and God’s people – not for *one* nation, but for all nations... The new relationship is based on faith – daring to receive and respond to God’s love and mercy and forgiveness and life, shown supremely in Jesus Christ...

Throughout the ages, the Church family has understood that we are in a new Covenant relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, by his death for us. As we continue to celebrate and share Communion, we are participating in this new Covenant. Here are just 2 examples from the New Testament. St. Paul writes,

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’

And, “[God through Christ] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life...”

Covenant relationships are all around us... We appreciate the covenant relationship of marriage, ordination, and other sacramental rites. We recall God’s Covenant relationship with all humanity, of which the rainbow is a reminder. In the roots of our faith, we see God’s covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants. Last but not least, as Christians, as members of the Body of Christ, we all joyfully participate as ministers of the New Covenant. The meal we share this morning is a means of grace – God’s love without measure...

Thanks be to God.