

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22: 22-30

Romans 4: 13-25

St. Mark 8: 31-38

Lent II 2024.

“That is why it depends on faith.”

St. Mark 4: 16a

Last week, we learned something about “covenants.” That is, a covenant is an agreement in love between 2 parties... Last week, we heard the story from Genesis 9: After Noah built the big boat and there was an even *bigger* flood, God made a covenant with his people that he would never have a flood like that again. As a sign of God’s covenant promise to all people, God created the sign of a rainbow. In the Jewish and Christian classical tradition, the rainbow is a reminder of God’s covenant promise of care, for all humanity...

This week, the first reading was about another kind of covenant. God reveals himself to Abraham, and God promises Abraham that he and his wife Sarah will have descendants. God has a special relationship with the Jewish nation. The sign of this covenant is the circumcision of Jewish males – it’s a reminder on the outside, of their covenant relationship with God on the inside – in the heart...

We heard last week that Christians are in a *new* covenant relationship with God, through Jesus Christ – not just for one nation, but all nations; all peoples, between us and God...

The sign of the first covenant with Noah was the presence of rainbows. A sign of the covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham was male circumcision. A sign of marriage covenants is our wedding rings. An outward sign of our baptismal covenant is through being washed with water...

What is the reminder to Christians of God’s new covenant relationship with us?... How can we be reminded that we’re in this new covenant relationship?...

Paul explains it all in today’s second reading. It begins,

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith... For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants... in the presence of the God in whom [Abraham] believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Paul’s explaining that we know we’re in this new covenant relationship with God, not by going to a place (like Jerusalem for Jewish people; or Mecca for Muslims)...

We know we're in this new relationship with God not by some outward acts of devotion (like circumcision for Jews, or bathing in the River Ganges for Hindus). We have this relationship by a change in our hearts – by having faith...

Paul further explains it's about believing in Jesus; about having faith:

It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Romans 4: 13, 16, 17, 24-25)

So, how do we know we have this new covenant relationship with God? Because we have faith... We are taking the promises of God, and the historical events of Jesus Christ, and daring to believe them. We are cooperating with the Spirit of God to let our lives be transformed, from the inside out, in every corner of our lives...

So we're invited – more than that, encouraged – to dare to believe. We're called to change from being self-centred to seeking God's will revealed through Jesus. We're called to turn, from trying to dominate other people, to learning how to serve one another in love. We're invited to know God – not as an angry distant Judge who is going to punish us for our sins – but a loving Friend, who inhabits our lives, and from whose love we will never be separated – not even by death... We're called to a new way of living, and a new way of believing... This is the wonderful spiritual journey of faith...

Different people come to faith in different ways... Some of us are drawn in through the community of the Church. As we see people around us who are learning to love in response to Christ Jesus, we see lives transformed, and we choose to make their God, *my* God... Others can be transformed by thoughtfully reading the Bible... Yet others are convinced by Christian teachers or apologists, or by devotional literature... Some of us can point to the exact day when we moved from trying to figure it out, to having an “aha” moment – when it made sense... For others of us, faith is more of a process – like the glasses we look into in an optometrist's office, as our spiritual vision comes into focus, and what is in front of us becomes crystal clear...

We have different ways of beginning our faith journeys. What matters in the end is that we are saying “yes” to God's invitation, and learning to live in response to it...

Most of us – perhaps all of us – are already there... Perhaps we can say, “I know I'm not perfect. I don't know everything in the Bible, or even understand everything about God. But I know I'm on my way. And I'm kind of encouraged that God can love even me, and bring forgiveness and hope into my life...”

If we're not at that stage yet, I suggest 2 steps... First, take time to explore the historical evidence about the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

As long as you aren't reading someone with an axe to grind against some Christians, the historical evidence that Jesus is the Son of God is very compelling... Christians do not take what is sometimes called a "blind" leap of faith. Instead, we are believed to come to a reasonable conclusion, based on the evidence. But there's always the step of daring to turn, and to let go...

Here's an illustration which might be helpful: For those of us who swim in pools, sooner or later, we've noticed a diving board at one end of a pool. Maybe we're in a large pool, with a high diving board at one end of pool... The first time we go up to the high diving board, it might be a little scary! Some of us might have tried it for the first time when we were little kids. Others of us might have been older children, or teenagers. I know that there are some swimmers who haven't tried the high diving board until late in their adulthood! The exact date in our lives doesn't matter...

When we're at the end of the high diving board for the first time, the water can seem a long way down!... We don't want to chicken out and go back down the ladder. Besides, maybe there are other swimmers behind us, waiting to take their turn. The purpose of the high diving board is to provide an opportunity for us to jump, safely... We have to step off, or jump off, or dive off, and let gravity do its work. It's a kind of letting go of control, but it's always exciting and worth it, when we do...

That's kind of a metaphor for faith, isn't it?... We can put it off indefinitely, but then we're missing out on the fun, wonder, and mercy of it all... It's participating in this process of surrender, of letting go, that we're doing what we're supposed to at the diving board...

Yes, we should explore the evidence for Christianity. But there comes a point when we've got the evidence, and we're just procrastinating, putting off the decision... We don't wait until all our questions are answered. I hope that until our dying day, every one of us here, myself included, will have new questions to ask; new opportunities to discover...

Now, if you're already in a place where you can say, "I think I've got it. I'm learning to believe and to live in response to Jesus Christ – great!..." If you've never explored the evidence, then for heaven's sake, what are you waiting for? God and Jesus and faith and heaven are too important to put off... However, in the off chance that there is someone here who is wants to try jumping off the high diving board, I invite you to say this prayer with me silently in your heart...

Thank you
Sorry
Please.

Amen.