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A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings
MARCH 2006

March 5, 2006

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

March 12, 2006

Gen. 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38 *or* Mark 9:2-9

March 19, 2006

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
II Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

March 26, 2006

Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

In the February readings, we explored how God transforms us so that we are equipped to live in service to others. This bedrock principle of our relationship to God and to our communities is another way of saying that we are called to be God's covenant people. In the March readings, we look at some of the scriptural development of what that covenant means.

God first makes a covenant with humanity in the story of the Flood. This covenant is made by the *authority* of God, but it is clearly for the *benefit* of humanity—indeed, of all living creatures—because God's promise after God's warnings and instructions is that life will not be wiped out again by the waters of a flood, no matter what. God strongly implies that people's failure to keep God's laws will never again be grounds for their destruction: "The narrative concerns the *grief of God* and the *emergence of new humanity* in the midst of the old judged humanity...it is not hard to see that the grief of God and the new creature have overridden the force of the law-suit."¹ This implication of grace, echoed in a different context in Psalm 25, is made explicit in the New Testament. In 1 Peter 3, the author directly compares the water of baptism to the waters of the Flood: "Thus the sacrifice of Christ, unlike those in the law, guarantees a pure conscience... The cosmic reach of that salvation extends back to the beginnings of humankind at the time of the flood."² Just as all humanity carries the legacy of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and all humanity carries the legacy of the obedience of Noah and his family, so too does all humanity have access to the legacy of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: "The whole Christian **gospel** could be summed up in this point: that when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and

believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ.”³ Covenant, then, is not primarily about God focusing on *what we do*, but rather focusing on *who we are*.

However, as we have seen in previous months’ readings, God never focuses on who we are as individuals without placing us in the context of our communities. It makes sense, therefore, that the story of God’s covenant with Abraham has always been understood to be about more than the blessing of a single individual: “Abraham is the first fruit of the new creation. He is the bearer of what is intended in creation... This is a promise more fundamental than even the land.”⁴ The Christian understanding of this covenant, as expressed in Romans 4, confirms the universal scope of God’s call to God’s people: “God’s real intention, in promising Abraham the land of Canaan, was to claim, rule and renew the whole world.”⁵ As with the covenant with Noah and his family after the Flood, and as Psalm 22 affirms, God’s promises to individuals embrace the entire world. At this point, we see that living in covenant with God may be for our benefit, but only as part of the greater whole of humanity. We are not given the world as a prize, but given over to the world in service. As Jesus asks in Mark 8, what good is it to gain the whole world but lose your soul? If we as Christians today struggle to give up the safety of trying to own and control our small pieces of creation, instead of trying to play our part in saving the entire world, we can gain perspective from the realization that “the church in every generation struggles not only to think but to live from God’s point of view in a world where such a thing is madness.”⁶ We are not saved *from* the world, but *for* the world: “The coming of God’s kingdom with power has a lot more to do with the radical defeat of deep-rooted evil than with the destruction of the good world that God made and loves.”⁷ In the same way, the story of the Transfiguration shows us that we should not try to keep God’s glory separate from the world, but rather to show it forth for the world’s redemption.

One consequence of this inclusive call is that we cannot use the full expression of God's covenant with us as an excuse to turn our backs on any person (or group of people) who appears to not be living in line with God's intentions. In the face of their shortcomings, our only proper response is to have faith that God will somehow set things to rights where they have failed to do so. After all, we trust that God can set our lives to rights when *we* fall short, as Psalm 19 affirms. We encounter God's laws, such as the Ten Commandments, as an outstretched hand rather than as a closed fist: "Obedience to the law is thus not seen as a response to the law as law; obedience is fundamentally a response to God and to all that God has done. Obedience is one way in which life can be set into a rhythm that is maximally responsive within a relationship."⁸ As Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 1, as often as our covenant seems broken when things do not go as we expect or wish, God renews it—shaping it afresh to us closer to fulfillment: "God is not merely faithful but also loving and caring, and we should display the same in our lives...Are we too fearful of being unworthy of God?"⁹ In John 2, the story of the cleansing of the Temple dramatically illustrates the recurring need for change. Even the people who have supposedly betrayed the covenant, turning the Temple into a marketplace, understand that what is important is not *what Jesus does* but *who Jesus is*: "The Jews' demand for a sign...is in reality a question about Jesus' authority."¹⁰ They are trying to determine what their relationship to him should be, since he is overturning the place where they most intimately act out relationship with God. They are invoking Israel's long covenant history with God, where rebukes for falling short always come accompanied by the invitation to try again, this time better.

Because we cannot turn our backs on each other, we are brought together in communities of people who fall short. Put another way, we form communities of sinners: "Confession of sin and forgiveness are thus both a community and an individual responsibility. The plague of serpents remained an ongoing threat to the community, and the raised bronze serpent remained an ongoing reminder to each individual of the need to turn to the healing power of God."¹¹ John 3 directly compares the raising of the bronze

serpent on the pole with the raising of Jesus on and through the Cross: “the physical act of lifting up is also a moment of exaltation. That is, it is in the crucifixion that Jesus is exalted...the Fourth Evangelist understands Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as one continuous event.”¹² As the plague of serpents provides the context for God’s healing gift, so too the tragedy of the crucifixion provides the context for God’s final victory over the power of death, as we see in Ephesians 2: “The main thing Paul wants to stress about all this is the sheer, almost unbelievable, magnificent kindness of God.”¹³ No matter what happens to us and around us—the Flood, crucifixion, self-denial, wandering in wilderness, temple cleansing, etc.—the real story (as we also hear in the moving poetry Psalm 107) is not what God might be doing *to* us but what God is doing *for* us, or *with* us. Even the ultimate misfortune, damnation, exists only as a context for God’s saving power. Here we find the deepest meaning of covenant: “If one believes, one’s present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes.”¹⁴ Covenant means that we focus primarily on who God is instead of on what God expects, which by extension means we will focus primarily on who our neighbors are instead of on what they are doing. It is not that our actions are unimportant, but they lack the power to break our relationship with God, and with each other—and they therefore also lack the power to free us from our obligation to God, and to each other. Covenant binds us together in community for all time, and beyond.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, c1982), 80.

² Pheme Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1995), 66.

³ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 4.

⁴ Brueggemann, 153-154.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Romans for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1-8* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004), 74.

⁶ Wright, *Mark*, 112.

⁷ Wright, *Mark*, 112.

⁸ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1991), 203.

⁹ Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1987), 17.

¹⁰ Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 544.

¹¹ Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1996), 136.

¹² O’Day, 552.

¹³ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2002), 20.

¹⁴ O’Day, 553.