

<i>Date Preached</i>	02-Aug-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	04-Jul-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 13, Year A (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>	Isa 55:3b-5; Mt 14:13-21		

" I will make for you an everlasting *covenant*; my steadfast, sure love for David. "



We don't hear the term "covenant" much anymore, perhaps mostly just in law, where we make covenants in contracts and establish covenants that 'run with the land,' as they say. And yet, **covenant** is the quintessential description, I think, of God's relationship with us, and with all of creation: even though we, as creatures of God, morph, meander and mess up, God remains steady and constant, always abiding and always providing, always forgiving and always saving. Even though God's covenant with us has remained fixed throughout eternity ... on account of our human willfulness, how *we exist*—how *we relate to God*—within that covenant has had to change over time. This morning, I'd like to explore a little with you how we have lived, and how we live now, with God, in covenant. It is a journey that has taken us from "*of God*" ... through "*toward God*" ... and brought us, ultimately, to "*in God*."

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I would argue that the place to begin to understand God's covenant with humanity is not with Abraham or even Noah after the flood, but at the very beginning: in the Garden of Eden. Both accounts of God's creation of the world, in Genesis 1 and 2, reflect a divinely ordered, and therefore perfect, state of relationship between God and humanity. In Adam and Eve, God created us in an expression of supreme love and grace, and we dwelt wholly and blissfully in God alone: God supplied everything we needed not just to live, but to thrive; and before that fateful bite of the apple, no act we did was wrong ... no idea we had or word we spoke was—or even could be—evil. In this perfect creation, where human-will played no part, there was no daylight—no operational distinction—between God and us. We were, in a word, *of God*. This state was God's *original* covenant with humanity: a permanent, perfect ecosystem in which we lived entirely within Godself; in God's love and joy and abundance. We had no awareness of being apart from God: no conception of self or need or desire. We may no longer regard the creation stories in Genesis as recounting the literal beginning of the world, but their depiction of our living ... covenantally ... *of God* is the very image of paradise we seek and we long for, isn't it?

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After the Fall—after, that is, we gained the knowledge that we were not God; that there is, in fact, daylight between God and us—our existence in God's covenant, as recorded in the Old Testament's history of the Israelites, changed. No longer *of God*, we became aware of our own needs and desires, and sometimes—often, in fact—satisfying them became our chief end, supplanting the covenantal love of God. We enjoyed flexing our ability to choose whom and what we worshipped; to puff up our own egos; to exalt ourselves and our own personal causes at the expense of other creatures and even creation itself. While God never wavered in God's covenant with us, our new-found knowledge took us from being *of God* ... to living merely *toward God* ...

struggling to remember and worship and rely upon God. God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore; promised Moses that Israel would be God's people forever; promised David that his line would have no end. In the Torah, God even provided the Israelites with great commandments and detailed ordinances for how to live toward God. God sent prophets and signs to remind and warn them when they strayed too far *away* from God. And yet, despite this continued renewal and reiteration of God's covenant, time and again the less worthy but more tempting objects and objectives of this world hijacked the Israelites' attention and destroyed their fealty to God. This is Isaiah's very message—his plea—in today's lesson: As we emerge from captivity in Babylon, God is offering to return us to a more Edenic existence with God, if you will simply listen to God's desires and follow God's commands—if you will simply turn your lives, in covenant, *toward* God.

But again and again, Israel—that is, we—failed. In covenant, God called Israel toward Godself—to love God and love the other—but Israel turned away. The Israelites grew wealthy and forgot to be thankful. They prized devout piety and worship and ignored the poor and the hungry. They pledged to follow no other god but the Lord and then worshipped at the feet of every idol they encountered. For the stark, painful reality is this: We, by ourselves, lack the ability to live toward God in any meaningful or lasting way. Without Divine help, we are too frail, too short-sighted and perhaps too self-righteous to put down the passing satisfactions and petty contentions of this world and simply live in full relationship with God. Love of *self* comes to us easily enough, but not so love of God and of the other. Therefore, so long as *our own goodness, our own merit*, was the pathway to our knowing God's complete love and total relationship with us—to knowing God's covenant—it eluded us forever.

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The Good News, however, is that in and through Christ, God re-ordered God's covenant with us, finally and forever: In undeserved mercy and infinite grace, God cancelled any requirement of our own goodness to be in full relationship with God and, through Christ, restored all humanity to its fullest possible relationship with God. In Christ's birth, our humanity is joined to the Divine. In Christ's death, all our failings are absolved, forever. In Christ's rising, we are granted eternity as the span of our relationship with God. And in Christ's Ascension, we are destined to spend that eternity at the table of the Triune God—a tiny foretaste of which we experience every time we make Holy Communion. God's covenant with us—God's will and desire and joy for us—has remained steadfast and unchanged, and Christ has *perfected* it, for *all* humanity and for *all* time. Christ has restored us to the true paradise of being *of* God.

But only a portion of humanity has understood and accepted this. We experience Christ's paradise in a world that is still only *toward*-God; a world that struggles to know, obey and worship its one Creator and Sustainer. And thus, we hover somewhere between **the** of-God of Eden and **the** toward-God of ancient Israel: We hover *in*-God. Just as Jesus did, we know the fullness and assurance of living *of*-God, and just as Jesus did, we also know the anxiety, sharpness and despair—even the suffering—that accompany living in a world that is merely (and then, only sometimes) toward God; that doesn't embrace God's covenant. Therefore, Christ's work in this world continues, and as His followers, we are called to play our part in God's covenant. The Christian mission is to show forth the complete love of God we live in ... by living in complete love ourselves. We do not love God and neighbor in some vain hope of meriting full relationship with God, but to know that we are already in it and to proclaim it with conviction and abandon. And this is the reason the

Gospels tell us so much about what Jesus says and does, for He is our pattern for living in-God; for living of-God in a merely toward-God world.

Consider the template-of-love Jesus provides in today's lesson from St Matthew:

- First, He *communes* with God. At the beginning of today's lesson, Jesus has withdrawn from the crowds—has gone off by Himself to be with the Father. When we pray, whether alone or gathered as a community, we reconnect—that is, we remind ourselves of the complete connection we already have—with God and, through God, with every other being in creation. Whether we pray in adoration or thanksgiving ... confession or oblation ... petition or, most especially, intercession, we shift our perspective from self alone to the universal and divine oneness we live in, with the entire world.
- Second, He teaches us to *care* for God's people. In today's lesson, the disciples' first instinct is to send away the thousands who have gathered around Jesus; to let them fend for themselves as the sun begins to set in the desolate wilderness. But Jesus turns the disciples' thoughts and shows them that whatever they may have, whatever means they may possess, are sufficient to love and serve others, if they will ask God to bless and multiply them.
- Finally, He teaches us to *co-create* with God. Before Jesus feeds the crowd, he cures the sick—he restores them to health and wholeness. As followers of Christ, we are called to go beyond tending to the daily needs of others—food, shelter, safety—as pressing and important as these are. We are *also* called to create this world anew, in Jesus' image. We are to emulate not just Jesus' caring and generosity in feeding the hungry, but also the compassion He shows in curing the sick ... and casting out demons ... and evicting the abusive moneychangers from the temple—in radically restoring other people's entire lives and courageously protecting them from evil, even if society at-large may condone it.

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That's a lot of words, so maybe it's best to end with an image, a familiar image. I invite you to think of the cross, maybe the one hanging over the altar ... or the one you wear around your neck or carry in your pocket [*take out my cross*]. How many elements do you see? Well, first, there is the vertical member, the element that lifts us upward from the plane of the earthly and toward the Divine. We can think of this as the covenant of Eden: our being assured that we have a complete, dynamic, loving relationship with God. And second, there is a horizontal member, the element that stretches out its arms to embrace the whole world, just as it is, and calls us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God: the Israelite covenant, perhaps. It is the love, service and sacrifice shown by Jesus that we strive for, but so often fall short of.

But the third element of the cross is the cross itself: the union of its two members ... the union of God's promised paradise [↕] and the world's harsh realities [↔]. When we follow the Cross of the One Who died and rose again for us, we are confident that those realities will not stand forever ... will be re-made into paradise; and we also know that because of the paradise we have been promised, we must play a role in that re-making. Such is the covenant of God; such is the covenant of the Cross.

