

Homily for February 16, 2017

“And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant which 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 cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

The word covenant is the heartbeat of the Bible. No word better captures the quality of the relationship God enters into with us than this word “covenant”.

To better understand the meaning of this word, let’s compare it with the word contract.

A contract is the exchange of property in the form of goods and services (“That is mine and this is yours”); whereas a covenant calls for the exchange of persons (“I am yours and you are mine”), creating a shared bond of interpersonal communion.

For ancient Israelites, a covenant differed from a contract about as much as marriage differed from prostitution. When a man and woman marry, they declare before God their undying love to one another until death, but a prostitute sells his or her body to the highest bidder and then moves on to the next customer. So contracts make people customers, employees, clients; whereas covenants turn them into spouses, parents, children, siblings. In short, covenants are made to forge bonds of sacred kinship.

So if you want to get to the heart of Scripture, think covenant not contract, father not judge, family room not courtroom.¹

With this in mind let’s think for a minute about the Covenant enacted in today’s first reading in which the rainbow is the covenantal sign. A rainbow occurs when raindrops and sunshine cross paths. This is a beautiful way to think about the symbolism of this covenant promise.

Do you remember back in Genesis 6.6 the Scripture says:

6 And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart

What is one of the effects of grief? Is it not, buckets of tears. One of the ways to understand the Flood is as the outworking of God’s grief because of the wickedness of the human heart. The rainbow therefore represents for us the promise that God will never again express his grief through the sending of a universal Flood, however it is also a continual sign of God’s vulnerability.

¹ Hahn, S. (1998). *A Father Who Keeps His Promises: God’s Covenant Love in Scripture* (pp. 26–27). Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books; St. Anthony Messenger Press.

What do I mean by God's vulnerability? Think of it this way. The rainbow is a constant reminder to us that because God is covenantal and relational he knows what it is to grieve. Grief is one of the experiences of being relational. But the rainbow is also a sign of hope because it is as the light of the sun is reflected and refracted in the droplets of water that the spectrum of colour occurs.

Droplets of water..... What are they like? They are like tears. The light of the sun interacting with the droplets of water creates the primary rainbow. There is always a secondary rainbow higher in the sky, that although less distinct, is visible, especially if there are dark clouds behind it.

The rainbow speaks to us of hope, because of the colour spectrum. But such a spectrum is only visible when the rainclouds, water droplets and the sunlight hit the droplets at a 42 degree angle.

Just as the conditions need to be right for the rainbow to appear, so too the conditions had to be right when God would enact his New Covenant, made not with water and the rays of the sun, but rather by water and the blood of the Son of God. With the last of God's covenants, the fullness of God's vulnerability is made visible to us, a vulnerability expressed by Jesus in today's reading when he foretells:

***And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.
32 And he said this plainly.***

So hard was this for Peter to accept that we read:

And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men."

Here is the point, Satan would have us believe that God is a contractual God. He keeps his part of the deal and we keep ours. If either side forfeits the agreement I will see you in court.

But a covenant is not like that at all. A covenant is for life, and a covenant gives life. But a covenant is also more personal and binding. The Covenants especially show us God's promise to be bound to us in love, a love that we are reminded of whenever we look at a rainbow, a love that we consume when we eat the sign of the New Covenant, the precious body and blood of Jesus.

Give thanks that ours is a covenantal God and not a contractual God.