

LENT AND GOD'S COVENANT IN A WORLD CHURCH

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, Sub-Dean and
Professor of Mission and World Christianity in the General Theological Seminary,
at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Darien, Connecticut,
on the Second Sunday in Lent, 12 March 2006
Year B, Lent II, RCL: Gen. 17.1-7, 15-16; Rom. 4.13-25; Mark 8.31-38

Imagine a new chapter opening in your 99th year! —

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him . . ."

Abraham's story is definitely a hope story for boomers!

As countless health product ads and second-career opportunities have declared,

"It's never too late!"

Never too late for what? — never too late for newness,
never too late for strengthened presence,
never too late for a fresh wind.

For us as Christians it's newness in God,

it's the strengthened presence of Christ with us,
the fresh wind of what the Spirit of God is doing within us and in the world.

It's to that prospect that we turn in this season of Lent:

taking stock of where we are in our lives
and turning, turning, turning back to the God in whom we live and move and have
our being

but from whom we have so often turned away and in so doing have turned away
from the our very selves.

Even this simple way of looking at our life with God assumes that God is there to turn
back to,

that God has declared God's self as perpetually available to us no matter what,
that God has initiated some kind of relationship with us that survives
our fickle turnings away,
our self-absorption in anxiety and ambition,
our obsessions with political struggles in office and neighborhood.

The assumption that God is there to turn back to is well founded,

because God is indeed always there,
because God has indeed declared God's self to be available in perpetuity,
because God has indeed initiated a relationship —

And that relationship is the covenant that God made with Abraham in that 99th year.

God came when, as Paul says — not putting too fine a point on it! — Abraham as a
progenitor, a begetter, should have been as good as dead.

God came at that point and initiated a relationship designed to last not only through
Abraham's lifetime,

but through the history of the people, the nation, the ethnicity brought to birth
through him and Sarah.

"I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations," says God to Abraham.

It is this multiplicity of nations inherent in God's promise to Abraham that Paul highlights in his letter to the Romans

as he seeks to understand how it was that in Christ Jesus God's relationship with Israel had been broken open so that non-Jews, even pagans in Paul's own experience, folks who had been worshipping before idols in places like Antioch, Corinth and Ephesus were being brought into a reconciled relationship with the God of Israel. It wasn't happening through obedience to the law of Moses, Paul emphasizes, nor through the practice of circumcision, but through the righteousness of faith — simply entering into a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus as the Christ, who, as Paul puts it in a pithy short creed at the end of today's lesson, "was handed over to death for our sins and was raised for our justification."

Staying faithful to enacting that covenant in his own life and death is what Jesus wrestles with in today's gospel.

He has an intuition of such a calling — that he is to engage the forces of sin and death that are circling around his own person and that such engagement can or will bring him to a violent death — but it is a fearsome prospect, as Peter reminds him.

He's not actually calling Peter Satan when he says, "Get behind me, Satan!" Rather, he recognizes and confronts Satan in the temptation he experiences in Peter's words.

What is God up to in the world? — the hard work of reconciling humanity with God in the eternal covenant that God initiated through Abraham.

Renewing, deepening and extending that covenant was Jesus' work, hence his eucharistic words, "This is my blood of the new covenant."

From the one to the many —

from the one person Abraham to the many people of Israel, from the one person Jesus not only to many individuals but to a multitude of peoples, so many that St. John the Divine can say in his Revelation that he sees before the heavenly throne a great crowd "from every family, language, people and nation" uniting in a glorious hymn to God and to Christ the Lamb. That movement from the one to the many continues into our own day as people groups around the world unite before the luminous presence of the triune God in their midst.

Lent renews our experience of how God renewed God's covenant with us in Christ Jesus. We often focus on that in our individual inner walk.

What I focus on with you this morning is how the covenant is shared in the diversity of the human family, especially around Lenten themes,

and for that I offer you several vignettes from the life of our Christian companions in other parts of the world.

First, Lent is a season for intensified devotion.

Well, right now about a hundred Christians are gathered for a Lenten night vigil in a small church that overlooks wheat fields in the village of Dogar,

a couple of hours from Amritsar in the Punjab of northwest India.

The sun sets about twelve hours earlier in India than it does here,

and the Dogar Christians have gathered for a Sunday evening vigil of prayer, preaching and singing as members of the Church of North India,

one of the united churches of South Asia, a church formed in 1970 when Baptists, Presbyterians, English Methodists and Anglicans came together for common witness.

I got to know the Dogar Christians two Lents ago while doing research on the Church of North India as part of the Global Anglicanism Project,

an initiative that Bill Sachs of St. Luke's is coordinating on behalf of the Episcopal Church Foundation to get a sense of the life and ministry of Anglicans at the grassroots all over the Anglican Communion.

Christians in India are a small minority – just 3 or 4% – and most of them come from low-caste or untouchable backgrounds, so they're despised by caste Hindus, and they struggle to overcome the oppression they've internalized from living in a caste-dominated society.

We arrived at Dogar at about 9 at night with the Bishop of Amritsar, and the vigil was well underway with about 100 people crowded into the small sanctuary.

The worship was entirely in Punjabi, with melodious and rhythmic Punjabi hymns accompanied by tablas and harmonium;

the praying was passionate; Pastor Bashir and others preached.

Most remarkably, the whole service was broadcast on loudspeakers mounted on the outside of the church,

so what was happening inside the church was turned inside out for everyone to hear in the nearby hamlets late into the night.

This impacted the privacy of both the listeners and the broadcasters —

I'm not sure it would fly in Darien or Rowayton! —

but *what made the broadcasting amazing was that it was occurring when Hindu nationalists were in power and ramping up their campaign to shut down the public profile and evangelism of Indian Christians.*

Here was Lenten practice with a risk.

The Dogar Christians, already on a frontier, want to share God's covenant with their neighbors,

and they're willing to take risks to do so.

As Jesus says to us today, "If any want to become my followers,

let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Second, Lent is a time for confession.

Many Christians in Africa take such confession very seriously.

In Zimbabwe I once had occasion to stay with a family who were members of the Church of Elijah Mugodhi, a prophet who founded the church in the 1930s.

They invited me to accompany them on a night-time church pilgrimage up to Paradise, their name for a remote spot atop the mountain above where they lived on a tea plantation near the Mozambique border.

As it happened, it was Lent.

Led by Lovemore Mupinda, the lay evangelist of the congregation, our party of ten started up without flashlights on a cloudy night in the rainy season.

The first stop of several on the way up the mountain seemed to be chosen expressly because it suggested the toils of sin:

especially dark under some low-lying trees, no good place to sit, roots and branches all tangled together in the dark, no peace.

We sat awhile in silence.

SaMupinda began a low, quiet song that called on the presence of God, and then he offered a pastoral prayer that ended with the Lord's Prayer.

Now the confessions began, offered aloud in the group, all in the Shona language.

One by one, people stumbled to their feet and talked about their failures of the past week: hitting a spouse or a child, losing one's temper at work, thoughts or acts of adultery, temptation to invoke the ancestors' spirits – the works!

Sometimes just a few, halting words; sometimes a torrent of words.

Everything was heard by everyone.

Evangelist Mupinda offered counsel in the group to each penitent.

Then more prayer and a song, then on up the mountain, stopping at several staging points along the way to rendezvous with other groups in the darkness and for more prayer and song.

Confession – probing, deliberate and public confession – paved the way for joyous celebration that gathered momentum as they traveled up to Paradise.

Might their example renew our own commitment to confession, to purity of heart, to the righteousness of faith that Paul's sets before us today?

Third, in Lent we ponder the cross of Jesus and what it might mean for our own discipleship

The third and final vignette I share with you from the world church is from the Diocese of Peshawar on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan,

a diocese where several people were killed a few weeks ago in riots over the now notorious Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammed.

Again, it was Lent when my wife Jane and I were there.

The diocese organized an inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims one evening at the University of Peshawar, in which the Bishop and I both spoke —

so bridges were being built across the great religious divide of our time.

Directly after the dialogue the British filmmaker who was accompanying us and I interviewed a Pakistani Christian evangelist who was sponsored by the diocese, just as like the inter-faith dialogue,

only he witnessed both through a reading room and in street evangelism.

He couldn't be filmed head-on, but only by way of a shadow of his head projected onto a wall, lest he be identifiable and his life be endangered.

In fact, his life was in danger all the time.

He spoke of people coming to faith in Jesus and forming small prayer groups.

He also spoke of receiving death threats; he spoke of his nephew, also an evangelist, who'd been hanged from a tree the previous year with a sign attached to him saying, "This is the fate of an infidel."

Yet he spoke freely in his native Urdu, and he spoke with joy,

He rejoiced in the faith and in his work as a bearer of the good news of Jesus the crafter of a new covenant with the peoples of the earth.

Fully prepared to lose his life quite literally for the sake of the gospel, he was clearly finding his life in the joy and freedom of the Holy Spirit.

What is the use of such experiences, such stories, such realities?

These realities assure us that in our walk with Christ we are not alone, but surrounded by a world-wide fellowship of Christians.

These realities tell us that gospel faith is not mono-cultural, that the Jesus movement is not a fetish of just our tribe, race, or culture, but the shared journey of over 2 billion people, most of them in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

These realities remind us that our own perceptions are not definitive, that we have no monopoly on how best to express the gospel of Jesus Christ, for there are very different ways of expressing faith in Christ.

These realities help us hang on to communion in the midst of turmoil, for they tell us that underneath the tensions and disagreements that divide Christians, and especially Anglican Christians in these days, there is a bedrock of shared gospel experience that is more abiding than the issues that divide us.

Finally, these realities present us with a frontier for learning, learning more deeply about Jesus, about the gospel, about community life, about liberation, about hope, for, just as every culture is judged by the gospel, so also every culture offers unique insights into the gospel from which we all can learn.

I believe this learning is already happening in St. Luke's.

Just last evening I was talking with parishioner Blake Robinson, who told me about how he spent twelve days in Malawi last summer with Bill Rankin of Gaia: they were visiting AIDS projects assisted by Gaia and getting to know the church in that small central African country.

"My life was utterly transformed!" exclaimed Blake,

and my guess is that a number of you have heard such testimony from him.

You have a second team preparing to travel to San Pedro Sula in Honduras to work with the Little Roses home for girls:

my guess is that you've heard from previous team members how they have been moved and pushed to new realizations through their encounters in the Body of Christ in Central America.

**God's covenant with Abraham had an outward momentum that Jesus freed for full
motion and commotion in the life of the world,
from the very beginning and into our own day.**

The world has never been the same.

Let us behold, and be transformed.