



SERMON 919

February 22, 2015

First Sunday in Lent

986th Week as Priest

813th Week at St Dunstan's

78th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

THE COVENANT

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Today seems a good day to talk about the concept of Covenant—and here I mean the covenant that God made with Noah, the covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah, and the New Covenant that Christ has made with us all.

But there are other kinds of covenants. Marriage is called both a covenant and a sacrament. The covenant is made between two people; the sacrament is God's work in marriage. Ordination is like that—a covenant made between a priest and the people, and a sacrament setting that person apart for a lifetime of ministry, pastoral care, teaching, preaching, and worship. It's a covenant that I can highly recommend!

But there are other covenants. A covenant is essentially an agreement, a contract, a treaty, a promise or pledge. When I was a kid, we had an unspoken covenant among the six of us boys. We never actually sat down together and agreed that we would defend each other against bullies, but whenever such a person arose who would contend against one of us, he had to deal with all six brothers. And usually, by force of numbers, the bully would back down without a fight. This happened on the ball field, at school, in the neighborhood, the city pool—wherever there was a need for solidarity and resolve, it was instantly met. I suppose it was more an Old Testament covenant, because we didn't give much thought to loving our enemies or blessing those who persecuted us. No, it was more like an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, *lex talionis*, retribution and revenge.

We lived across the street from the Beckwiths. One day, Bill Beckwith was playing with his little brother Joey in their front yard. Joey grew up to be a Major League baseball player for the Kansas City Royals and pitched in the 1985 World Series, but in 1962, he was six years old, and his brother Bill had tied Joey to a pine tree in the front yard. I ran across the street to see what was going on. Bill had positioned an apple on Joey's head, stepped a few paces away, and was drawing back his bow to shoot the apple like William Tell. I yelled at him to stop, and Bill yelled, "Mind your own beeswax!" I picked up a green pinecone and threw it at Bill, hitting him on the side of his head. Bill ran in the house crying, and I untied Joey from the tree—in effect, saving his Major League career and winning the World Series for Kansas City 23 years later.

Just then, Bill came around the back of his house and started throwing green pinecones at me. Joey joined in, and they ran me off. But I returned with my brothers Jim and Joe, and we won the war. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Then we all got whippings that night—the Beckwiths and the Warren boys.

Life under the Old Testament Covenant could be brutal. God made the everlasting covenant with Noah,

but only after he had destroyed the earth and every living thing. God made the eternal Covenant with Abraham and Sarah, with Isaac and Rebekah, with Jacob and Rachel, but that did not always mean blessing as they understood blessing. Sometimes it meant fleeing to Egypt, slavery, wandering in the wilderness, destruction of the Temple, and captivity in Babylon.

Over the generations, the Chosen People were defeated by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Romans. They were dispersed to the far corners of the earth. They suffered persecution, pogrom, and inquisition. And let the record show that the Jews, God's Chosen People, have survived to this very day—when the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Romans have all long since disappeared from this world.

In a new day, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the Good News.”

The Good News, *evangélion*, was the coming of the Kingdom of God, and with that, the arrival of a New Covenant. That new agreement, contract, treaty, promise and pledge was like the Old, in that it was made by God with God's People—but the New Covenant was made *in*

person. No longer could God's People consider God to be a distant, aloof, exalted Judge; now God was made Man, and he walked among them, worked signs and wonders, raised the dead, and taught them an altogether new way of living. Yes, the People of the New Covenant must love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength—that is, with everything they were and would ever be. And they would love their neighbors as themselves—but the guiding principle of this new way of living would be Love, not Law. Mercy, not Judgment. Forgiveness, not Punishment. The New Covenant was signed in blood, sealed in crucifixion, and delivered in resurrection from the dead. There would be no return to an old dispensation; there was no need any longer for the sacrifices of the Temple, because the ultimate sacrifice had been made in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was Emmanuel, that is, God who is with us.

This is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, dear friends. The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is very near you. Repent and believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ. **AMEN.**

972 words