“Keeping Covenant”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

I’ve been wanting to rewatch the movie *Glory* for a number of reasons lately and having searched a few scenes on Youtube this week will probably go ahead and rent it tonight. *Glory* came out decades ago and is a powerful story of the all-Black infantry unit from Massachusetts that fights for the Union during the Civil War. You may remember Matthew Broderick playing the young man who becomes their Colonel, fighting alongside with them. Much of the movie is stirring. One such moment is when the line of men are contracting to enlist, and when the character played by Morgan Freeman makes his way to the head of the line, the soldier at the desk disdainfully says, “Make your mark.” Somewhat proudly, Freeman says, “I can write my name,” and does. He puts his seal to the agreement between himself and the military, and he holds up his part of the agreement. The other side of the bargain was sorely lacking, though. Disdained because of their race, the 54th regiment is denied equal supplies, only receiving serviceable shoes when their Colonel Shaw demands them. The Union is not faithful to them, though each of the men is faithful to the regiment and to their leader, Shaw. Former gravedigger turned soldier, Freeman’s character is one of the many whose lives are a reflection of their faith—in God as we learn in their songs, and in freedom, as we learn from their extraordinary commitment to battle.

One of my favorite singer songwriters is Lucinda Williams. She has had a long and storied career, and now is finally receiving the acclaim she has long deserved for her lyrics, if not for the smoothness of her voice. On one album I have listened to for many years, she includes a song called “Get Right With God.” I may even have mentioned it before. The lyrics are interesting, and could cause you to squirm a little, if you thought that God would ask any of these things of us.

“I would risk the serpent's bite; I would dance around with seven. I would kiss the diamond back. If I knew it would get me to heaven. I would burn the soles of my feet. Burn the palms of both my hands. If I could learn and be complete. If I could walk righteously again. 'Cause I want to get right with God. Yes, you know you got to get right with God. I would sleep on a bed of nails, ‘til my back was torn and bleeding. In the deep darkness of hell, the Damascus of my meeting. I asked God about His plan, to save us all from Satan's slaughter. If I give up one of my lambs, Will You take me as one of Your daughters?

After reading a reference to the Ark of the Covenant during our Thursday study group a couple of weeks ago, I went back to the Book of Exodus to read it, and then moved on to reading the first 16 chapters of Leviticus. The very specific details of the ark’s dimensions had struck me, and remembering the oddly specific descriptions regarding sacrifice in Leviticus, I thought I would reread to see if any of it makes sense to me this Lent. Some of these requirements sound like a piece of cake, though I did find myself wondering whether, perhaps, the lamb I cooked two weeks ago would have “pleased the Lord with its fragrance.” There is a lot that people of faith have understood to be necessary to make us right with God. Thankfully, in the meal of remembrance we celebrate in Communion together, we celebrate the new and lasting covenant with God that is made through Jesus. Covenant is at the heart of our relationship with God, and we learn a lot about it in this morning’s readings.

You may wonder what part of the narrative takes place in the verses left out of the lectionary reading from Genesis. Maybe you will even be relieved that we aren’t speaking of circumcision today, but in fact that is what happens during the missing verses. Whereas we hear what God promises to Abraham and Sarah in the verses we *have* heard, in verses 8 through 14 we learn that in return for God’s share of keeping covenant, Abraham and his family are asked to make certain that, whether related by birth or through association, every male member of his household is circumcised. I may have quoted before to you a dear professor’s comment regarding this outward sign of covenant: “Only for God would Abraham have agreed to this.” I think that in reflection on this moment in Jewish history—in our history, we might be even more outwardly grateful for the role that Jesus plays in our keeping covenant with God. The sign and the seal of Abraham’s keeping covenant with God is the circumcision of his household. The signature or mark of members of the 54th infantry is written on paper, but proven in blood.

I *wonder . . .* Have you ever *wondered* what you are willing to do to keep covenant with God? What are we willing to do to respond to God’s love for us? Maybe this morning you wonder whether Abraham’s willingness to *do* circumcision for all of his descendents was what made him right with God. If so, perhaps you are wondering today what God requires of us? Paul knew when writing to the church at Rome that *they* were wondering what they needed to do to be right with God, and so he responded to this concern. We can learn a lot not only from Abraham, but from Paul’s explanation to us.

Covenants exist in so many times and places, in so many relationships, though we might not always call them by that name. Promises that include mutual commitment are what make up the substance of covenant. Biblical covenants are said to be either 5 or 7, depending on how one regards them. They begin with our first stories of Adam and Eve, and continue through to Jesus. Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, David—through each of these men’s relationship with God there were covenants made with humanity, and in different ways with different marks of their agreement. Finally, what we can *celebrate* today is the New Covenant in Christ.

I regularly look for wisdom from Frederick Buechner, the late, wonderful pastor, writer, theologian, and teacher. “Nobody claims there's a chuckle on every page, but laughter's what the whole Bible is really about. Nobody who knows a hat from home plate claims that getting mixed up with God is all sweetness and light, but ultimately it's what that's all about too.

Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old-age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough” (Originally published in *Peculiar Treasures* and later in *Beyond Words*).

Hmm . . . so is laughter a sometimes sign of covenantal relationship with God? You bet! When we keep in mind that God wants for us all that is good and right; that God keeps covenant with us, keeps God’s promises *to us*, we might well laugh with joy!

Let’s think about it. We are promised a new covenant between God and us, through Jesus Christ. This is a gift to those of us who want to believe that faith is our answer to how to get right with God. All that was necessary to hold up our end of the relationship before Jesus is no longer necessary. This is not to say that we are not to try to be the best persons we can be, keeping close to God’s will for us to love others. However, what *keeps us right with God* is Jesus’ redeeming act on our behalf, and God’s eternal grace. God loves us, and there is nothing we can do about it, thanks be to God. Abraham was asked to *do* a great many things, as were Moses, David and the rest of Israel. What saved Abraham, though, what brought him right with God was his faithfulness to God—not so much the particular acts he performed, but his desire to respond faithfully to God’s will for his life.

And *God is faithful*. God is faithful to us, even when we sometimes do or don’t do, say or don’t say what might mark us as Christians. We can rely on the lasting symbol we see before us. That symbol is the cross, and is the lasting *mark*, the only symbol on which we need rely, as long as we live. Jesus has made us right with God. Jesus provides us with our end of the covenantal relationship with God; he has finished the work of binding our relationship. No more must we cut, or bleed, or sign or even sing the right words of connection and promise. God has kept all the promises in Christ, and remains faithful. *Our task* is to follow Jesus faithfully, knowing that when we fail, as we often do, God remains faithful to us. This is the new covenant between God and us in Jesus Christ. Amen.