

A Covenant of the Heart

Sermon for Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29 2009

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As we come to this fifth and last Sunday in the Season of Lent, the theme of the covenant is raised one final time by the prophet Jeremiah, as he predicts the future of the people of God—and of the human race. The covenant that will come in the future, he says, will not be like the ones of old, which were constantly broken by the people of God. It will be instead a covenant of the heart.

“But this is the covenant that I will make” says the Lord. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

What a wonderful vision of a time when the law of love for God and one’s neighbor would be hard-wired into the human psyche! Yet like Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom, Jeremiah’s still lies in the future as a hope and a promise. The world is still torn by strife and violence—and yet here and there, in individuals and in communities, the gifts and the values of a truly transformed human spirit may be seen and experienced.

Over the years I have known such oases of the spirit—and whenever I have experienced the deeper qualities of love and compassion it has stirred again for me the hope for the future. I remember especially a conference I attended in 1953 on Star Island, off the coast of New Hampshire, when I was 19 years old, wide-eyed and innocent.

The leader was a missionary home from the Philippines, and his contagious faith permeated that community. Discovering the love of God in one another, the members of the conference experienced a taste of what the kingdom of God might be like. And in other settings over the years I have found moments lived within the context of a worshipping Christian congregation that have brought to me again the pull of Jeremiah’s vision.

Today (*at the 10 o’clock service*) we (*will*) have the opportunity of experiencing such a moment together as we celebrate the baptism of Paige Holland. Even in the midst of a world in economic and political strife, we (*will*) draw apart to a place where together we can experience the hope and the joy of the spirit, as we welcome into our midst the newest baptized Christian.

In this service, we will affirm that never before has there been a Paige Corpening Holland. She is unique in the eyes of God, to her parents, and in the life of this congregation. As she is touched with water and with the Holy Spirit of her Creator, Paige will be affirmed by the congregation as a precious individual and member of this part of the Body of Christ that is St. Mark’s in Basking Ridge.

And as part of this Christian ceremony, we will affirm once more together with her, her parents and godparents, what is known as the Baptismal Covenant in the Episcopal Church. Of all the covenants we have been considering in the scriptures during this Lenten season of 2009, this is the one which speaks most directly to us in this day and age.

It begins with our affirmation of the faith handed down through the centuries – a faith in the loving power of the Creator God, expressed through the life, death and resurrection of the one whom we know as his unique Son, Jesus the Christ—and in the ever present reality of the Holy Spirit.

Then it asks us to respond with our own personal commitment to the body of Christ and to a life of Christian compassion with the following questions:

Will you continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?

(Will you remain constantly a member of the worshiping body of Christ, sharing together at the altar the joy and Power of his presence?)

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

(Will you work on your own personal being and your actions in relationship to God and other people, seeking the forgiveness of God and the community when you fail?)

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

(Will you demonstrate to others by what you say and do that you are indeed a follower of the joyous and powerful law of love?)

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

(In your relationships to those around you, will you express the loving service that was demonstrated by Christ in his ministry and his death?)

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

(In your public actions and witness, will you seek to break down the walls that divide people from one another and to bring justice and peace to human affairs?)

As we (*will*) say these powerful words that form the baptismal covenant, we as a people (*will*) join with Paige in affirming our belief in Jesus Christ, and in our commitment to live out the law of love in our human experience. We do this knowing the cost to Christ of the path he chose to follow. As we come to the end of Lent and prepare for Passion Week beginning with Palm Sunday, we acknowledge the self-giving love that was expressed in his final days.

This is, therefore, a perfect time for a baptism. The seeds that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel for today, which fell to the earth some months ago, are getting ready to sprout, their heads peeking through the March soil. The baptism of Paige (*will*) bring with it the promise of new life and growth in the spirit.

(This morning, we will say again the baptismal covenant in place of our creed) As we say together the baptismal covenant we are reminded of our own baptisms, for some of us a very long time ago. And we rejoice in the ways that over the years the seeds of the spirit sown then have sprouted and grown in our adult lives.

And now may we join together in prayer for Paige, her family and ourselves as we enact once more the powerful rite of Christian Baptism.