

5th Sunday in Lent – Year B

March 29, 2009

Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Pastor Paul Horn

Jesus signs a new contract

31 “The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to e them, f” declares the LORD. 33 “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

This week, as I mined the treasurers from God’s Word in Jeremiah 31, I rediscovered my love for the Hebrew word for covenant. The Hebrew word for covenant actually means to cut, that is, the cutting of an animal for sacrifice, which was included in the making of a covenant. The definition I came up with is this: a covenant: to make a solemn agreement between two parties, with stipulations, benefits, and responsibilities. So I sat down and thought about every contract I’ve signed or promise that I’ve made and am bound to...

- Everyday in grade school I pledged “allegiance to the flag of the United State of America and to the republic for which it stands...” Whether I realized what I was saying or not, I had promised faithful duty and loyalty to my country.

- In eighth grade, May 24, 1992, I was confirmed in the Christian faith at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in West Allis, WI. I, along with my classmates, promised, “I believe that what I had been taught by my pastor the last two years is faithful and true to the Word of God and I will remain faithful to that Word of God until death.”

- June 10, 2001, I promised to be faithful to my wife as I long as I live.

- June 28, 2002, I promised to pay the bank full amount I borrowed for my very first car loan.

- July 18, 2004, I stood here in this church and promised to be faithful to the divine call to be your pastor and shepherd, to teach and preach the Word of God in its truth and purity and administer the Sacraments faithfully.

- I have made promises to be a godparent twice, I promised to pay my mortgage, cable, internet and phone bills.

Some of those contracts required a signature, but other promises were made with a hand shake, a hug, or a verbal agreement

Back up 4,000 years. The days of the Old Testament patriarchs saw a different kind of covenant. Genesis 15 describes a contract between two parties in graphic detail. A heifer, goat a ram and dove and young pigeon were slaughtered. The cow, goat and ram were cut into two pieces and arranged on the ground opposite each other. The two parties making the agreement would walk between the two pieces of animal as if to say, "If you or I break this covenant, this is what will happen to us. Let it not happen." A bit more severe of a consequence than repossession of your car for failing to pay your bill, wouldn't you say?

In Exodus 20, the LORD made a covenant with his people at Mount Sinai. There he gave his law, the 10 commandments. The people said, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." So Moses took blood from an animal sacrifice, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (vs7,8) Blood was shed to seal the deal between the LORD and his people. But if they would not obey...

Last week we heard what happened when the people did not hold up their end of the covenant; the story of the bronze snake and the poisonous vipers. That's just one example. The Israelites broke their promise over and over and over again. The LORD said our lesson this morning vs32, "They broke my covenant, even though I was like a husband to them, they were like an unfaithful wife to me." If they did sin, the LORD provided a way out. Part of the covenant included sacrifice and ceremony. The people could come individually to offer an animal sacrifice for sin or guilt. As a result, the temple was a bloody place. Animals were slaughtered daily. The LORD wanted to remind the people that blood must be shed in order to pay for sins.

Can you think back to the promises you've made over the years or contracts you've signed? What happens if you don't keep some of those promises? Depending on the promise... you could lose your job, your marriage, your home or car. If you do not keep some of those promises some folks might be disappointed and angry with you. What about this promise... When you became a member of this congregation, you stood here, before God and the members of this church, and promised to be faithful with God's Word and His Sacraments, to support the Lord's work with your time, talents and offerings, to lead a godly life, even to death.

You might be thinking to yourself, "Well, I've been pretty good at keeping that promise to lead a godly life. I may tell a lie here and there, a lustful thought now and then, but who doesn't? I drink a little bit, sometimes too much, but it doesn't hurt anybody. I may fudge numbers on my taxes sometimes, but besides, AIG and the other banks don't deserve to have my tax dollars. I'm not as bad a person as what those people have done. I haven't murdered. I haven't cheated on my spouse. I don't beat my children. I don't verbally abuse my friends or coworkers...at least not everyday. I've remembered my confirmation vows for the most part. I show up for church every once in a while. I crack open my Bible at home every now and then, throw a few dollars in the plate and volunteer every now and then. I'm not that bad of a person, right?"

I have good news and bad news. Good news is... I think that you are good people, better than me anyway. Bad news is...it doesn't matter what I think. It matters what God thinks. He says, "Be holy." (Mt 5:48) God says, "Whoever stumbles at just one point in trying to keep my law is guilty of breaking all of the law." (James 2:10) God says, "All have sinned and fallen short of my glory." (Rom 3:23) To God, you and I pretty bad, awful, rotten people. We haven't done what he asked to do in his Word, even if we think that what we have done and left undone hasn't been all that bad. Try to be as good as we can be, it's not good enough. Try as we might, we have broken our promises, and more importantly, we've broken his commandments, over and over and over again.

So what must I do to atone for my sins? What sacrifice can I make to get right with God? God says, "The soul who sins is the one who will die." (Eze 18:20) You must be punished. You must be banished from his presence forever to a place of eternal suffering and torment. Unless...unless he could be persuaded to forgive you and forget your life of disobedience.

My friends, pay attention, and listen to what your LORD and God says to you this day, “I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.” (Vs34) How could Just, Almighty God, who threatens to punish sin, forgive me? How could the omniscient, all-knowing God, forget the awful things I’ve done?

In our lesson God says, “I will make a new covenant, it will not be like the old covenant.” The old covenant was based on the Law which demanded, “Do this! Don’t do that!” Someone came and satisfactorily kept the commandments according to God’s standards. He did not cheat on his taxes, he did not lie, he did not get drunk, he was a faithful student of God’s Word, he kept all his promises. This one was none other than your Savior, Jesus. Jesus Christ came and kept the law, because you and I could not (Gal 4:4,5). The old covenant was also based on animal sacrifices. Christ Jesus came as the One Sacrifice for the sins of all people, whoever lived, who are living and whoever will live. The blood of the Lamb of God was shed to pay for those sins, as God demanded... For without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22). Forgiveness has come to you and to all people, for blood has been shed.

We still beg the question, “How can our all-knowing God forget about our sins?” When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he declared, “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) When Jesus was sacrificed on the altar of the cross, the Father looked, and there he saw all your sins, all your wickedness, all your disobedience on his Son. For Jesus took your sins from you and placed them on himself. The Father engraved that picture into his memory, because there the guilt of all sins was punished. He has indeed forgotten about your sins, as the prophet says, “You will hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 7:19)

This new covenant is not based on the Law, or anything you or I need to do. This new covenant is unilateral, one-sided, God does everything. Jesus Christ completely fulfilled the Law. Jesus Christ made satisfaction for sins. This new contract is based on everything Christ did for you. This new contract is not signed with five special pens, one for each letter of Jesus’ name, as presidents often do. This new contract is not chiseled onto stone tablets, as God’s Law was when it was presented to Moses. This new covenant is signed on your hearts, with Christ’s blood. Our lesson says, “After those days, I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” (vs33) After which days? After the old covenant was fulfilled through Christ. And law here in this context refers not to the 10 Commandments, but the whole of God’s Word, specifically the Gospel; the good news that Jesus is your Savior from sin and death, from hell and Satan’s power. God gives you assurance that his new covenant is yours by writing that promise on your heart.

Just as there are many ways to make a promise or sign a contract, there are a couple of ways that God writes his covenant on your heart. One is through Holy Baptism. It is unfortunate that so many people confuse Christ's intended purpose for baptism, and they turn it into a promise that we make to God. However, according to Scripture, in Baptism, God comes to you and makes you a promise. In 1Peter 3:21 God says, "Baptism now saves you." Because through baptism Jesus washes your sins away (Acts 22:16). Similarly, in the Lord's Supper, God comes to you with this bread and wine, together with his Son's body and blood and says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:28; 1Cor 11:25) Through these special means, the Holy Spirit writes the gospel on your heart to reassure you that, "I will be their God, and they will be my people." (vs33)

Sins forgiven and forgotten... does not mean that we have a license to sin? Do you remember when the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who was caught in adultery? Jesus turned to her and said, "Go and sin no more." (John 8:1-11) The woman was repentant. She was sorry and turned to Jesus for forgiveness and turned away from her sinful lifestyle. Likewise, live your life, and show that this new contract is on your heart, in my mind, on your lips and in your actions. God has made a promise to you, "You are forgiven, your sins have been forgotten," live that way.

When I reflect on all the promises I have made over the years, the contracts I've signed, I realize that I have not always been faithful. I thank my God that he has been faithful to all his promises, that through his Son Jesus, my sins have been forgiven and forgotten. My dear friends, take heart, your sins have been forgiven and forgotten, because Jesus signed a new contract for you. Amen.

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f Or was their master