

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH – Hartford, CT

*NO MORE WATER: THE FIRE NEXT TIME*

The Reverend Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick    March 1, 2009    The First Sunday in Lent, Year B

*Genesis 9: 8-17    1 Peter 3:18-22    Mark 1:9-15*

The notion of covenant is central to the history of God's engagement with humankind. There are implicit covenants with Adam and Eve, and later God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky if he will follow God's injunctions. The most famous covenant, of course, is that between God and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. God says, "If you will be my people I will be your God" and "I will keep faith with those generations who love me," but if you deal falsely with me, I will "punish the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations." Still later Jeremiah talks about God writing a new covenant on the hearts of his people and if they abide by its terms He will remember their sins no more. And Jesus, of course, says at the Last Supper that the wine in the cup is his blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. [Luke 22:14-20].

And then we have this morning's reading in which God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants. This is the most explicitly universal and comprehensive of all the covenants: it is with *all* Noah's human descendants as well as with *every* living creature for *all* future generations.

What is common to all these covenants are, first that there is blessing if the covenant is kept, and punishment if it is not; and second, the covenants extend, at least implicitly, through all the generations of humankind, not just the people present when the covenant was first initiated. As such, these covenants include us because we are the heirs of those who first received them and are still under covenantal obligations in our relationship with God.

Over the last few weeks we have been privileged to watch the deeply moving story ("Traces of the Trade") of how a basic covenant in American life was broken and how a covenant with evil replaced it. We saw in the film how the consequences of the betrayal of those our ancestors enslaved have played out in the lives of succeeding generations of the descendants of the original slave traders. If we, as an ostensibly Christian nation in the 18th century, had truly believed in the covenant relationship with God, we would never have allowed ourselves to justify the enslavement of a people based solely on the color of their skin and/or because they were regarded as useful instruments in producing wealth for those who owned them. Now I say "we" deliberately. Of course none of us was *individually* there when our ancestors struck a bargain with the devil and accepted the right to own slaves and to trade them like cattle when it was financially beneficial to do so.

But if we take the notion of covenant in scripture seriously, all the generations of human beings are linked by covenant. The consequences of our failures to live up to our ongoing obligations to the covenant have been extended unto the third and fourth generations, the Biblical shorthand for the interdependence of all generations. We cannot escape our moral place in this tangled net of poisoned relationships. We have inherited both the privileges and the sorrows of the bonds (and bondage)

established by our ancestors' complicity with the evil of slavery. The economic wealth that accrued to the first slaveholders and traders has often passed down through the generations so that their great-great-great grandchildren started out in life in a relatively privileged economic position. (This remains true no matter how much some present-day beneficiaries of that wealth might delude themselves into thinking that their success has been due solely to their own efforts). These privileges have also extended to those of us born with white skins who have found our way in society considerably eased by not having to deal with racist assumptions about our abilities. And the economic poverty and political powerlessness that were inflicted on the first slaves eventually were passed on to their descendants in a virtually never-ending chain of sorrow and suffering, in the form of discrimination, racism, educational disadvantage, and ghetto poverty.

Because of our founding as a nation in which slavery flourished, we have a broken covenant with our African-American forebears because we have historically denied them the rights that should come with being American citizens, free and equal. We broke that covenant at the very founding of our nation by treating a slave as 3/5s of a person (but without voting or property rights) in order to bring the slaveholding states of the South into the Union in the first place. We broke that covenant by refusing to even question the morality and legality of slavery until the middle of the 19th century. Even when slavery was officially abolished after the Civil War, the legacy of the broken covenant continued on in legally sanctioned racial segregation, discrimination, and the neglect of the living conditions of the poorest of the poor crowded into urban ghettos or left to their own devices in rural pockets of extreme poverty.

But, through His grace the patience of God with our covenantal failures has not yet been fully exhausted. God says in Jeremiah that if we will respond appropriately to the covenant that He has written on our hearts, He will forgive our wrong-doing and remember our sins no more. And He says to Noah that when he sees the bow in the clouds, he will remember the covenant that he has established with all flesh for all future generations.

But covenants have a reciprocal dimension: they are not a form of cheap grace in which God gives mercifully and abundantly while we take that gift without paying any price. With respect to the broken covenant, those of us who have inherited an economic head-start because of the privileges of skin color, cannot excuse ourselves from covenantal responsibilities in the present by claiming that we were not present when the covenant was first broken. To make that claim is to deny the profound interconnectedness of all generations which each Biblical covenant is at pains to emphasize.

One of our great failings as a people is thinking that individually we make ourselves from scratch, having no roots in the past in which we are entangled and from which we acquire our privileges or our sorrows.

But we pay a high price for such a non-historical delusion. We are already paying that price in the collapse of our financial institutions that were built on the idolatrous promise that you don't have to think about the future: just buy now on credit without foundation even if there is no realistic expectation that you will be able to pay off your debt in the future. And we are also paying the price for our failure to pay attention to the long-term consequences of nearly three centuries of slavery. But the good news is that we are not without hope. As the words of Bert's anthem this morning put it: the sin of fear has

given way to life in hope. *There is a way through* which we can help to repay our debt to those who were the victims of slavery, segregation, and neglect: we can use the present collapse of the unrealistic expectations of the dream of ever-growing financial abundance to fundamentally re-order our national as well as personal economic priorities. Some have called for reparations to those who are the descendents of the first victims of the history of racial injustice. This is right as far as it goes but we also need to be forward looking. We who have inherited the privileges of our sinful past need to think forward to present and future generations. And we can do that by choosing now to devote our national and personal resources toward the re-creation and re-development of the fundamental institutions we will need to live healthy and fulfilling lives in this society, especially those who have been victims of injustice and oppression: these are the institutions in particular of education, housing, and employment. This will be costly and a major shift in our national priorities and willingness to commit our finite resources to its completion. But if we shed ourselves of the alluring but ultimately empty promise that we can continue to accumulate personal wealth without end while ignoring the social and economic conditions of those who are far less well-off than we are, then we can begin to address the underlying systemic conditions that perpetuate racism and unjustified economic privilege. This is a pivotal moment for our nation. Martin Luther King was right when he said that the arc of history is long but it bends toward justice. But if we aren't willing to pay the price of justice now in this moment of fundamental change in our nation, then we will have to contemplate two notions beautifully expressed in the old Negro spiritual. The first is that there will never again be destruction of the earth by water: the words of the spiritual say "God gave Noah the rainbow sign" and promised no more water. But the second, more ominous, note which we neglect to our peril is, in warning that God's patience is not infinite: "no more water, the fire next time."

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