

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“I will make my covenant between me and you,” God says to Abram, the father of all who believe.¹ “I will establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you ... for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring.... I will make you exceedingly fruitful.” Blessings and fruitfulness everywhere: wow, our Genesis lesson sounds awfully cheery for a rainy Sunday in Lent!

To be fair, every Sunday *is* a festival of the resurrection of our Lord, even in Lent. Those who take on a Lenten spiritual discipline—fasting or what have you—can take a break on the Sundays in Lent. I explained this the other day to a woman in my book group. I’ll tell you, she was absolutely *appalled* that folks who give up something for Lent might get to enjoy their forbidden fruit on Sundays. That sounded too easy. Lent should be hard—she said it right out. Sounded like she was thinking Lent should be *punitive!*

Well, that idea is not foreign to our Anglican tradition. We grope our way toward the light of Christ, confessing that “we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness ... which we most grievously have committed” against God and neighbor, “provoking most justly [God’s] wrath and indignation against us.”² The punitive approach has strong foundations in Scripture. The prophet Joel urges, “Rend your hearts and not your garments!” and you get the sense that it’s only just

barely a metaphor to him; he'd be fine with you going ahead and actually rending your heart, as necessary. Joel's the prophet who warns that the heavenly army of God is on the march to kill us all. This is Joel: "The LORD utters his voice at the head of his army; how vast is his host! Numberless are those who obey his command. Truly the day of the LORD is great; terrible indeed—who can endure it?" Who indeed? The prophet Ezekiel imagines a people so unable to repent that the only solution is divine vivisection: "I will remove [their] heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh," God thunders.³ Spiritual surgery—and no anesthesia, with Ezekiel! He and the other prophets rage at the lack of holiness in their communities, rage at the callousness with which their leaders treat the poor and the powerless.

So my book group friend wasn't wrong. Lent is serious business. It's a time for fearless spiritual inventory, when we take an unflinching look at our spiritual commitments and ethical choices. Lent calls us to examine the desires and addictions that govern our lives, to face the ways in which we need to amend our lives and open our hearts more fully to God's grace. This spiritual accountability is important. We do a lot of harm, as sinners.

We privilege our own needs over those of others.

We deny the truth out of anxiety, stubbornness, or meanness.

And we delight in cataloguing the sins and failings of others, a venerable tradition beloved of passive-aggressive Christians everywhere.

We need to look unflinchingly at that stuff, and Lent's the time.

“But surely we’re not all that bad,” you might say. “No *hearts of stone* here!”

Look, I’m happy to concede that we’ve made strides in our common life.

Extreme poverty has been reduced significantly.⁴ Medical technologies and disease eradication have definitely advanced—something to celebrate. Education is a value almost universally honored.⁵

But we dare not be complacent—not just 11 days after the high school shooting in Parkland, Florida.⁶ We have utterly failed our schoolchildren, over and over again, as they have been cut down in allegedly “safe” spaces consecrated to the joy of learning. Did you know that you can buy a bulletproof backpack insert on Amazon for \$129.99? They come in pink, purple, and assorted other colors. How about this: how about instead of monetizing the safety of our children with bulletproof backpack inserts, we *repent* of our lack of political will to confront greed? How about we *repent* of our ridiculous failure, year after year, to ban civilian purchase of weapons designed to inflict catastrophic harm on mass casualties?

Or consider the callousness we and many countries enact daily in our policies about refugees. Maybe we do know something about having a “heart of stone” after all. For just one example: Rohingya families who escaped death-dealing violence in Myanmar now tremble in Bangladeshi refugee camps as the monsoon season approaches. Life is already barely livable in those overcrowded and dangerous camps. People live in vast shantytowns perched on unstable hillsides. Experts warn that April will inevitably bring disastrous mudslides, contamination of drinking

water, and outbreaks of disease in the camps.⁷ How is it that in the 21st century, we haven't mustered the resources and the expertise to handle these desperate situations?

Oh, we need to repent. We surely do.

We can't solve original sin, of course. But we can direct our hearts continually back to our need for God's grace in Jesus Christ.

We can recommit ourselves to daily prayer—maybe even just write a prayer on an index card and carry it around with us.

We can dive into Scripture with renewed focus to remember the covenant articulated to Abraham and sealed on our foreheads in baptism.

I don't have a punitive word for you this morning. I'm not going to lay down a "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"⁸ kind of message. The Holy Spirit has given me something else for you this morning: a reminder about who you are in your covenant identity with God. A word of refreshment to bolster your resolve and calm your fears. A word to deepen your resilience, to energize your spiritual creativity, to assure you that with God, all things are possible and every moment is infused with grace.

We live in a world *radiant* with God's promises.

It may be hard to remember that when we see on our favorite 24-hour news channel that news crawl at the bottom of the screen—you know, that continually unfurling

line of text that keeps the latest developments before our eyes. Everything is “breaking news,” and it’s almost never good. The constant stream of negative developments can distort our perspective to the point where we forget the power of grace, compassion, creativity, and resolve. We become obsessed with the narcissism and bitter arguments, the name-calling and posturing that have taken the place of leadership and community-building in our current cultural moment.

I’m all for staying informed.

But I am *not* about letting narratives of despair, rage, and fatigue tell us
who we are.

We have a counternarrative—a different story that tells us who we are
and Whose we are.

To help you remember the Christian counternarrative when you’re faced with bleak or despairing news, I’ve prepared a Scripturally based crawl of truths about God’s covenant faithfulness to you.^{[slip of paper]⁹} I would like to have gotten this to move across the screens of your electronic devices, but in this age of digital surveillance, that would have been creepy, and I don’t have the tech capacity to do that. So these slips are what I came up with.

BREAKING NEWS: You are “children of the living God!”¹⁰

BREAKING NEWS: You belong to a God who has promised fidelity to every living creature since the days of Noah! God’s faithfulness encompasses you,

surrounds you, is the very breath that animates your singing and your struggles, your creativity and your passion, your joy and your vulnerability—all of your living!

BREAKING NEWS: You belong to a God who promises through Hosea,

“I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the earth....

I will make you lie down in safety ... in righteousness and justice,

in steadfast love, and in mercy”!¹¹

BREAKING NEWS: You belong to a God who is *your* Shepherd, who in the wilderness times of life will “lead you beside still waters” and “restore your soul”!¹²

BREAKING NEWS: “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea”!¹³

THIS JUST IN: You belong to a God who calls you by name,¹⁴

a God who will *never* forget you,

a God who continually creates light and healing and hope,

writing and rewriting the covenant of grace on your heart!¹⁵

And this same God promises, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful.”

It’s that simple.

So repent, and believe in the good news!

In the Name of the One who has sealed you by the Holy Spirit and marked you as His own: Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever.

Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

25 February 2018

Lent 2B

Gen 17:1-7, 15-16; Ps 22:22-30; Rom 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ See Rom 4:16-17 in our Epistle lesson this morning.

² See the Confession of Sin in the liturgy of the Holy Eucharist, Rite I, in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the wording of which goes back at least to 1662. The 1549 (first) Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* has this: "First, that you be truly repentaunt of your former evill life, and that you confesse with an unfained hearte to almightie God, youre synnes and unkyndnes towardes his Majestie committed, either by will, worde or dede, infirmitie or ignoraunce: and that with inwarde sorowe and teares you bewaile your offences, and require of almightie God mercie and pardon, promising to him (from the botome of your hartes) thamentment of your former lyfe." According to J. Robert Wright, in the 1549 rite, "The general confession was directed to be said 'in the name of all those that are minded to receive the Holy Communion, either by one of them, or else by one of the ministers, or by the priest himself' because very few of the congregation would yet have had or been able to own their own copies of the book itself" ("The First Prayer Book of 1549," 2002, found at anglicanhistory.org; the original publication information is not preserved there, unfortunately).

³ See Ezek 11:19-20, 36:26. Compare the less violent image in Jer 31:33, and see in Deut 30:6 the image of God "circumcising" the hearts of believers.

⁴ Measuring extreme poverty is a tricky business. Various studies set the line for abject poverty at different levels of daily income. According to some claims, extreme poverty has been cut by 37%, 50%, 58%, or even 74% in recent decades. See Linda Qiu's 23 March 2016 analysis on Politifact [here](#) for details of challenges

in measuring poverty. By any count, 1.5 billion or considerably more people remain in deep poverty across the globe. Of interest is the visual representation of the history of global poverty from Our World in Data [here](#). This resource, founded in 2011 and directed by economist Max C. Roser, says that global extreme poverty fell in the period from 1860 to 2015 from 44% to under 10%. I encourage readers to interrogate these and related claims with whatever analytical skills and knowledge they can bring to bear on the discussion. Roser's work to understand the living conditions of people around the world has a motivating ideology: to accentuate positive change in order to counter the "psychic numbing" and ethical paralysis that can overwhelm those who focus on trauma and suffering.

⁵ In many cultures, gender oppression does still bar women and girls from unfettered access to learning. UNESCO estimates that "16 million girls will never set foot in a classroom ... and women account for two thirds of the 750 million adults without basic literacy skills." See the report [here](#). Many interrelated factors in patriarchal cultures, including gender-based violence and enforced disparities in access to employment and economic resources, conspire to bar women and girls from resources that would enhance their knowledge, skills, and agency.

⁶ On 14 February 2018, a 19-year-old armed with a legally purchased semi-automatic rifle shot and killed 14 students and three teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

⁷ Listen to the National Public Radio report, "[Monsoon Rains Could Devastate Rohingya Camps](#)" (8:16), from 7 February 2018, and see at the embedded link the sobering photos of one of the camps. NPR reporter Jason Beaubien stresses that the camps are vast: the one he visited was some 3,000 acres, holding "nearly 800,000 people." Conditions in the camps are already substandard and dangerous, with drinking-water sources at the bottom of steep hills. Unreinforced pit latrines, already unstable on the edges of sharp inclines during the dry season, will certainly be compromised once the heavy rains begin. The April monsoons are expected to bring massive landslides. Health professionals anticipate that outbreaks of disease will be inevitable.

⁸ I allude here to the famous "fire and brimstone" sermon preached by theologian and revivalist leader Jonathan Edwards in Enfield, Connecticut on 8 July 1741. The text of the sermon is [here](#). Edwards' focal text was Deut 32:35. Throughout the sermon, Edwards seeks to catalyze repentance in his hearers by means of dramatic images of the swift and inescapable nature of divine punishment. For example: "It is no security to a natural man, that he is now in health, and that he does not see which way he should now immediately go out of the world by any accident, and that there is no visible danger in any respect in his circumstances.... Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noon-day; the sharpest sight cannot discern them." Today no less than in the 18th century, Christians need to remember

whom we follow: neither money nor power nor influential figures in social media, but Jesus Christ, the One in whom all things were created (John 1:1-18) and all things are redeemed. The Gospel of Mark, from which our Gospel lesson is taken this morning, is all about the urgency of following Jesus. Much happens at an extraordinary pace in Mark—everything is “immediately” this and “immediately” that. (The word translated “immediately,” εὐθὺς, occurs 41 times in Mark.) For Mark, discipleship is the most urgent thing in the world. Reflecting on Mark 8:34 in our Gospel lesson this morning, I aim to encourage my hearers by showing that the call to follow Jesus builds on venerable and trustworthy promises of God to all who believe.

⁹ Before worship, slips of paper bearing these statements were put in the pews:

BREAKING NEWS: You are beloved!

BREAKING NEWS: God is writing grace on your heart!

BREAKING NEWS: God will make you lie down in safety!

BREAKING NEWS: You are a child of the living God!

BREAKING NEWS: God’s faithfulness surrounds you!

BREAKING NEWS: God will never forget you!

BREAKING NEWS: God will restore your soul!

BREAKING NEWS: God’s mercy is vast as the sea!

BREAKING NEWS: God calls you by name!

¹⁰ Hos 1:10. As regards promises made to Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures: with deep humility Christians may dare to hope that, as we are grafted into the covenant people through the grace of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 11), we too may trust in God’s covenant faithfulness.

¹¹ See Hos 2:18-20.

¹² See Psalm 23.

¹³ The words to the hymn, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy” were written by Frederick William Faber (1814-1863). The hymn is in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* as # 469 to the tune *St. Helena* by Calvin Hampton (1938-1984) and #470 to the tune *Beecher* by John Zundel (1815-1882).

¹⁴ See Isaiah 43.

¹⁵ See Jeremiah 31.