

COVENANT

What do you know about Jewish custom of cutting covenant? They used to take animals and cut them in half, longwise, and lay them opposite each other, and walk between the two pieces. It was how they sealed a covenant.

Just like in Genesis when God told Abraham to cut the animals in half. And God was the one who walked between the pieces of flesh, in the form of a smoking oven and a flaming torch. That was the form of the Abrahamic covenant.

At Jewish wedding ceremonies, the fathers would do the same things. They would cut the animals in half and lay them opposite each other, and the father of the bride and the father of the groom would walk between the pieces. In doing that, they were saying, "I will give my life for this covenant. If my child fails to keep it, may the Lord do the same to me that I did to these animals."

When people made a covenant, they kept it, because God witnesses it. It's very serious. The covenant stands, even if it's one-sided. God kept his covenant, even though the Israelites broke it over and over. When you walk between the pieces, you're in covenant.

By deceitful ways, the Gibeonites got Israel to enter into covenant with them. Joshua kept it anyway, even when they knew they'd been deceived, because Joshua knew how serious covenant was.

Jonathan, Saul's son, entered into covenant with David. They swore to protect each other with their lives. Everything that was Jonathan's became David's, and everything that was David's became Jonathan's. They were identified with each other.

Look at it this way. There were these two guys who were best friends. Really, really close friends. They're closer than brothers. They wind up going to war together, and they sort of bond. So one day Friend One tells Friend Two that he wants them to have a covenant with each other. He wants to know that, whatever happens, Friend Two will protect him. And he promises to do the same. He also wants to be sure that, if anything happens to him, his friend will protect his family and take care of them. Again, he promises to do the same. So as a symbol of this covenant, they swap clothes.

See, Friend One is a higher rank than Friend Two, so when he gives Friend Two his clothes, it is like he's giving him all the privileges and rights of that rank. When his subordinates see him, they think he's the other guy. But his enemies consider him a greater target than he was when he wore his own clothes. So with the privilege comes awesome responsibility.

What it symbolized to each of them was this: "I'm in you, and you're in me." They were so closely identified that they were literally willing to give their lives for each other. Over and over, the higher-ranking friend protects his subordinate friend.

When Saul set out to kill David, you don't see Jonathan siding with his father. He had a covenant with David, and that superseded his relationship with his father. He was sworn to protect David. That's what it means when you enter covenant with someone. You

keep it. You take it seriously. You defend and protect them. You give them what's yours.

Then one day, a great tragedy befalls Friend One's family, and he is killed, along with his two brothers. Friend Two grieves deeply and just about never gets over it. He gets promoted, big-time and is very successful, but he still never gets over the death of his friend.

Years later, he finds out that Friend One has a son that is still living. He's excited, because he thought all the children had been killed. He finds out that this son was injured in the tragedy that came on his family. His nurse tried to escape with him, and he fell and became crippled. But his nurse got him out of harm's way and has raised him ever since. Now he's an adult, living in poverty, still crippled.

So Friend Two asks the son to come talk to him. The son is frightened. He's not sure if this man is a friend or an enemy, but he agrees to come. Friend Two tells him that he was in covenant with his father, and that he is sworn to protect him, too. So he invites him to move into his expensive home, and eat at his table, and live like one of his own sons. In one day, the son is transformed from being a poverty-stricken, crippled recluse to having all the riches that Friend Two can offer. See Second Samuel, chapter nine.

When couples exchange rings, it's like the ancient ritual of exchanging robes, symbolizing the merging of their two identities and all their possessions. When couples exchange vows, they are to remember the gravity of the covenant into which they are entering, how serious and holy and binding the covenant is under God, and how they are bound to love and protect each other, care for each other's families, and fight each other's enemies. Their union makes the two become one. When she takes his name, this is another way of identifying herself with him, just as we all take the name of Christ when we enter into covenant with him. When they cut the cake at the reception, the exchanging of the pieces of cake, each fed to the other, is the same as the old covenant custom of eating something that represented the covenant partner. In Christian marriage, Christ is declared Lord, and he is to be at the center of the marriage.

In Galatians 3, we read that we were clothed with Christ, so when we accept Christ, we take his robe, so to speak. And we're identified with him. His family is our family. His enemies, Satan and all who fight with him, are our enemies. Jesus says this is the new covenant in his blood. We are in covenant with Christ when we enter into covenant with him. We symbolically pass between the pieces of Christ's flesh. Hebrews 10:20 shows that we can enter the holy place through the veil, that is, Jesus' flesh. We walk between the pieces. We are in covenant with Christ in just that way.

Communion represents our eating of Christ's body and drinking his blood to remind us of the new covenant. This is the ultimate covenant meal. If we Christians really understood about covenant, it would change every area of our life. Not a day would go by, not an hour, that we weren't thankful for what Christ did for us. We'd wear it like a robe. It would be all over our face. His light would shine out of us. But most of the time we don't.

How much time do we spend each day studying God's Word? Fifteen minutes? Thirty? And how much time do we spend in prayer? Just think about it. A man gave his life for us, and we mostly ignore him. We think he died for us so that we could walk in and out of his house three times a week. We can't possibly understand loyalty to the man who saved our skin, if we don't take much time for the one who saved it.

--Terri Blackstock, author, *Word of Honor*, adapted by Patrick J. Hession

"The time came for Mary to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:6f.). These words touch our hearts every time we hear them. This was the moment that the angel had foretold at Nazareth: "you will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:31).

This was the moment that Israel had been awaiting for centuries, through many dark hours – the moment that all mankind was somehow awaiting, in terms as yet ill-defined: when God would take care of us, when he would step outside his concealment, when the world would be saved and God would renew all things. We can imagine the kind of interior preparation, the kind of love with which Mary approached that hour.

The brief phrase "She wrapped him in swaddling clothes" allows us to glimpse something of the holy joy and the silent zeal of that preparation. The swaddling clothes were ready, so that the child could be given a fitting welcome. Yet there is no room at the inn. In some way, mankind is awaiting God, waiting for him to draw near. But when the moment comes, there is no room for him. Man is so preoccupied with himself, he has such urgent need of all the space and all the time for his own things, that nothing remains for others – for his neighbor, for the poor, for God. The richer men become, the more they fill up all the space by themselves. And the less room there is for others.

Saint John, in his Gospel, went to the heart of the matter, giving added depth to Saint Luke's brief account of the situation in Bethlehem: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (John 1:11). This refers first and foremost to Bethlehem: the Son of David comes to his own city, but has to be born in a stable, because there is no room for him at the inn. Then it refers to Israel: the one who is sent comes among his own, but they do not want him. And truly, it refers to all mankind: he through whom the world was made, the primordial Creator-Word, enters into the world, but he is not listened to, he is not received.

These words refer ultimately to us, to each individual and to society as a whole. Do we have time for our neighbor who is in need of a word from us, from me, or in need of my affection? For the sufferer who is in need of help? For the fugitive or the refugee who is seeking asylum? Do we have time and space for God? Can he enter into our lives? Does he find room in us, or have we occupied all the available space in our thoughts, our actions, our lives for ourselves?

Thank God, this negative detail is not the only one, nor the last one that we find in the Gospel. Just as in Luke we encounter the maternal love of Mary and the fidelity of Saint Joseph, the vigilance of the shepherds and their great joy, just as in Matthew we

encounter the visit of the wise men, come from afar, so too John says to us: “To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). There are those who receive him, and thus, beginning with the stable, with the outside, there grows silently the new house, the new city, the new world. The message of Christmas makes us recognize the darkness of a closed world, and thereby no doubt illustrates a reality that we see daily. Yet it also tells us that God does not allow himself to be shut out. He finds a space, even if it means entering through the stable; there are people who see his light and pass it on. Through the word of the Gospel, the angel also speaks to us, and in the sacred liturgy the light of the Redeemer enters our lives. Whether we are shepherds or “wise men” – the light and its message call us to set out, to leave the narrow circle of our desires and interests, to go out to meet the Lord and worship him. We worship him by opening the world to truth, to good, to Christ, to the service of those who are marginalized and in whom he awaits us.

In some Christmas scenes from the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, the stable is depicted as a crumbling palace. It is still possible to recognize its former splendor, but now it has become a ruin, the walls are falling down – in fact, it has become a stable. Although it lacks any historical basis, this metaphorical interpretation nevertheless expresses something of the truth that is hidden in the mystery of Christmas. David’s throne, which had been promised to last forever, stands empty. Others rule over the Holy Land. Joseph, the descendant of David, is a simple artisan; the palace, in fact, has become a hovel. David himself had begun life as a shepherd. When Samuel sought him out in order to anoint him, it seemed impossible and absurd that a shepherd-boy such as he could become the bearer of the promise of Israel. In the stable of Bethlehem, the very town where it had all begun, the Davidic kingship started again in a new way – in that child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lain in a manger. The new throne from which this David will draw the world to himself is the Cross. The new throne – the Cross – corresponds to the new beginning in the stable. Yet this is exactly how the true Davidic palace, the true kingship is being built. This new palace is so different from what people imagine a palace and royal power ought to be like. It is the community of those who allow themselves to be drawn by Christ’s love and so become one body with him, a new humanity. The power that comes from the Cross, the power of self-giving goodness – this is the true kingship. The stable becomes a palace – and setting out from this starting-point, Jesus builds the great new community, whose key-word the angels sing at the hour of his birth: “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to those whom he loves” – those who place their will in his, in this way becoming men of God, new men, a new world.

Gregory of Nyssa, in his Christmas homilies, developed the same vision setting out from the Christmas message in the Gospel of John: “He pitched his tent among us” (John 1:14). Gregory applies this passage about the tent to the tent of our body, which has become worn out and weak, exposed everywhere to pain and suffering. And he applies it to the whole universe, torn and disfigured by sin. What would he say if he could see the state of the world today, through the abuse of energy and its selfish and reckless exploitation? Anselm of Canterbury, in an almost prophetic way, once described a vision of what we witness today in a polluted world whose future is at risk: “Everything was as if dead, and had lost its dignity, having been made for the service of those who

praise God. The elements of the world were oppressed, they had lost their splendor because of the abuse of those who enslaved them for their idols, for whom they had not been created” (PL 158, 955f.). Thus, according to Gregory’s vision, the stable in the Christmas message represents the ill-treated world. What Christ rebuilds is no ordinary palace. He came to restore beauty and dignity to creation, to the universe: this is what began at Christmas and makes the angels rejoice. The Earth is restored to good order by virtue of the fact that it is opened up to God, it obtains its true light anew, and in the harmony between human will and divine will, in the unification of height and depth, it regains its beauty and dignity. Thus Christmas is a feast of restored creation. It is in this context that the Fathers interpret the song of the angels on that holy night: it is an expression of joy over the fact that the height and the depth, Heaven and Earth, are once more united; that man is again united to God. According to the Fathers, part of the angels’ Christmas song is the fact that now angels and men can sing together, and in this way the beauty of the universe is expressed in the beauty of the song of praise. Liturgical song – still according to the Fathers – possesses its own peculiar dignity through the fact that it is sung together with the celestial choirs. It is the encounter with Jesus Christ that makes us capable of hearing the song of the angels, thus creating the real music that fades away when we lose this singing-with and hearing-with.

In the stable at Bethlehem, Heaven and Earth meet. Heaven has come down to Earth. For this reason, a light shines from the stable for all times; for this reason joy is enkindled there; for this reason song is born there. At the end of our Christmas meditation I should like to quote a remarkable passage from Saint Augustine. Interpreting the invocation in the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father who art in Heaven”, he asks: what is this – Heaven? And where is Heaven? Then comes a surprising response: “... who art in Heaven – that means: in the saints and in the just. Yes, the heavens are the highest bodies in the universe, but they are still bodies, which cannot exist except in a given location. Yet if we believe that God is located in the heavens, meaning in the highest parts of the world, then the birds would be more fortunate than we, since they would live closer to God. Yet it is not written: ‘The Lord is close to those who dwell on the heights or on the mountains’, but rather: ‘the Lord is close to the brokenhearted’ (Ps 34:18[33:19]), an expression which refers to humility. Just as the sinner is called ‘Earth’, so by contrast the just man can be called ‘Heaven’” (Sermo in monte II 5, 17). Heaven does not belong to the geography of space, but to the geography of the heart. And the heart of God, during the Holy Night, stooped down to the stable: the humility of God is Heaven. And if we approach this humility, then we touch Heaven. Then the Earth too is made new. With the humility of the shepherds, let us set out, during this Holy Night, towards the Child in the stable! Let us touch God’s humility, God’s heart! Then his joy will touch us and will make the world more radiant. Amen.

Pope Benedict XVI – Homily at Midnight Mass 25.12.2007