

The Second Sunday of Lent, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

I walked out of a grocery store on North and Prospect at about two minutes to nine the other night. I know what time I was walking, because I had just bought some wine, and, as you know, they stop selling it at 9 pm on the dot. Winded from my race through the store, I come out into a very dark night, and up in the sky, I see a huge white clock face, shining like the moon. But the time was wrong. It was off by several hours and a handful of minutes. I checked my watch just to be sure. The public clock was dead wrong. I found the broken time on this enormous clock unsettling. It seemed like an omen somehow spreading over our part of the city, telegraphing that things were not right. Hamlet famously observed, the time is out of joint. I had just been reading about the covenant between God and Abraham, and I wondered if this is what it feels like when we are out of covenant with God—a huge clock looking over the city and showing the wrong time. As a kid, I remember winding a big grandfather clock in our front hallway. If we didn't wind it weekly, the hands would slow, then stop.

Christianity shares a lot with other world religions—the emphasis on the plight of the poor, the golden rule, the mystic tradition of oneness or unity with God. Many faiths talk about these things. Even so, we have inherited something unique from our Jewish ancestors—the concept of a covenant with God. In our Old Testament reading, God selects Abraham to be the leader of a nation, and God limits God's own actions and God's own power to enter into an intimate relationship with Abraham and uncountable generations of Abraham's descendants. I don't believe that anything like this has been seen in religion before or since. God is the God of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, and the descendants of Abraham and Sara agree, to follow the Lord God Almighty. Outside observers might think the God we worship is remote, cold, or distant. But in these earliest encounters, we find a God who loves the bumbling nobody Abraham from the edge of the fertile crescent and wants to enter into a binding relationship with him. It's the opposite of remote. The covenant between God and Abraham impacts every aspect of life for our ancestors in the Old Testaments. It defines them and tells them, generation after generation, who they are.

Imagine the covenant between God and the people as this huge, shining clock, providing guidance and illumination to everyone who can see. Imagine this clock tower sitting in the middle of our city, reminding us of the goodness of God and recalling us to faithfulness to the covenant that God made to our ancestors Abraham and Sarah. Now imagine that covenant broken. Imagine the clock ringing out the wrong time day after day.

People have always had a hard time tending to our covenant with God. Time gets out of joint. Every time we ignore the needs of the poor, the orphan or the widow. Every time we choose greed over the wellbeing of others, we disrupt the covenant. God remains faithful, and we forget

our half of the bargain. The prophets came, one after another, to remind us to repent, to return to God. Sometimes we listened; sometimes we didn't.

And then, as the church teaches, Jesus came asking for followers. Jesus did everything in his power to explain the covenant to stubborn people in a new way, in a way that made sense to his tribe. He talked about the cross—that great and gruesome symbol of Christianity that promises to transform straying into fidelity, death into life.

The church has taught for two thousand years that the old covenant God made with God's people came through Abraham and that Jesus represents the new covenant. But for some reason as I read the texts this week, I wondered if it's more helpful for us to understand these two stories as part of the same movement of God trying to be faithful to us, trying to love us. Jesus wants us to return to a life with God, to return to the intimacy that Abraham enjoyed with the divine. We seem to muck it up one way or another, but whether we're talking about covenant or cross, God is faithful.

Take up your cross, Jesus says this morning. Return to God. Drop all those other things that you are carrying—self-deceit, avarice, apathy, perceived powerlessness. Drop them all and take up the cross of Jesus. Return to God. Attend to the covenant that is in our midst. Make it bright, and true, and right.

Over and over in Lent, the church reminds us to turn around, attend to God, throw away the things we don't need. At first that can feel overwhelming. How can I possibly do what the church is asking me to do? Lent, though, is not an individual sport. The covenant is not just with Abraham—it's with an entire people. Jesus isn't calling just individuals to follow, he is asking a tribe to take on the responsibilities and the risks of the cross. God comes to us at St. Mark's as a tribe, feeds us as a tribe, forgives us as a tribe, calls us back to God as a tribe. Do not try to do this Christianity thing alone, because you won't make it. We are in it together.

And we have some work to do. Spend two minutes with the headlines, and the work in front of us names itself. Lent is when we wind the clock. When we attend to the covenant between God and God's people. Take spiritual inventory. Look in your neighborhood for places that seem out of joint. Peer into the corners of our church and see if there's some work we need to be doing as a spiritual family. Lent is our opportunity to really believe that we are the children of a God loves us. Our covenant needs attention. The cross needs attention. Wind the clock. Amen.