

First Sunday in Lent 2024  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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I'm not sure if they make teachers like this anymore, but back in my schoolboy days, there was a fleet of no-nonsense schoolmarm teachers who didn't put up with guff, or lip, or sass. I think in subsequent years, when opportunities for women broadened, these women probably started to run board rooms or laboratories. But, in my day, those women often became teachers and conducted their classrooms like Bernstein conducted the New York Philharmonic.

My sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Connel, brought her no-nonsense attitude every day to class, and as much as we were afraid of her, I think we also respected her greatly.

Now, it might come as a surprise to you that every progress report I ever received as a student said some variation of 1. Ian is very bright and 2. Ian talks too much in class. And it is true, I did like to chit-chat when we were probably supposed to be reading or something.

In any event, at school that year, there was an initiative where kids got sent home with little yellow slips for good behaviors and little pink slips for bad behaviors. I, of course, had never gotten a pink slip, mostly because my parents would have murdered me. But then one day, Mrs. Connel had really had it with all my talking, and she came over to my desk and told me in no uncertain terms that if I disrupted class one more time, I would be writing sentences longhand. The next day, of course, I disrupted class again, and Mrs. Connell started to write me a pink slip. I knew I could not go home with a pink slip if I valued my life, and so I reminded my teacher that, actually, she had said that the punishment for talking in class was going to be writing out sentences. As she sat there with her pen poised over the pink slip, I could tell that she was deeply annoyed that I had reminded her of her promise from the day before. And, I think even then, I knew that I really deserved to get a pink slip. But, Mrs. Connell was a woman of great integrity, and she decided to honor the promise that she had made. I had to write out 100 sentences, and my parents were never the wiser that I had been a little jerk in class.

I think one of the things that Mrs. Connell had going for her was that she treated our classroom like it was built on a covenant. She expected rigor and courtesy from us, but she also demanded a high level of safety and skill from her own leadership of our class. Even though we didn't use that covenant language, I think every one of her students could sense the bridge of integrity between her and us. She kept her promise, even when I was sort of being a jerk.

We don't talk a lot about covenant in the New Testament. In fact, Christians sometimes can be a little cavalier about how Jesus work on the cross replaces the older covenants in the Old Testament. Even so, I think that covenant is a useful tool to use when thinking about God, and I think it is one of the great inventions of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In our story from Genesis, God decides to enter into a serious relationship—almost like a marriage—with this strange little man Noah, who, a few chapters later, will be naked and drunk in a tent. He's not the superhero of faith that we sometimes see in our children's Bible. But God takes the relationship with Noah

seriously, and God put God's own integrity on the line to be in that kind of friendship. No other God, before or since, has acted in the strange, covenantal way.

And so, when we hear the prophets—think about what we heard from Joel on Ash Wednesday about making sure that we fast and pray—they are always calling us back to the covenant that God made with our ancestors. God promises to be our God, and we promise to live by God's rules. For modern listeners, some of these rules seem kind of archaic, but I think the shape of the covenant is still valid and still beautiful. Care for the orphan and widow. Welcome the stranger. Worship God and ignore idols. These are all excellent reminders for God's people.

Lent is, in many ways, a call to God's people to remember our part of the covenant with God and to spend some time thinking about our part of the relationship. We are to trust that God will be faithful to God's side—that's God's nature after all—but in Lent we do some self-examining to check on our side of the street. Maybe we have been short on kindness. Or maybe we have been miserly in our charity. Maybe we have been self-involved or not a terribly good friend. Or maybe there was a place where we could have worked for justice and we decided not to for whatever reason. Show me someone who doesn't have some places for improvement, and I'll show you a liar.

I know that the rainbow story in Genesis is kind of hard to get into. And that it seems strange God needs a reminder not to destroy the entire world. Maybe that part of the story is too old and too savage to let you enter into it easily. Maybe some other allegory makes more sense to you. But for my moment, covenant is an idea that we ought to keep a close hold on. We are people whose ancestors promised God to live in a particular way, and who received God's promise that God would live in the midst of us. The circumstances have changed a bit, but we have as more in common with our ancient ancestors than you might think—the world is in political chaos, the poor and the needy are suffering, armies march for war, the world still needs the covenant between God and God's people—between God and us. So, examine your side of the covenant this Lent and amend what needs amending. Remember the covenant and keep it holy, during Lent and then all year round. Amen.