

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 3, 2024

EXODUS 20:1-17 | PSALM 19 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25 | JOHN 2:13-22

In this season of Lent, our Hebrew Bible readings have been about covenants. We've used these to explore some fundamental ideas about things like grace, faith, and the wide embrace of God's love.

These covenants, like all promises, are based on words. But these covenants also have a physical expression to help us remember them. In the flood story, for example, God promises not to flood the earth again and then sets a bow in the clouds. And God says that whenever the bow is in the sky, God will remember this promise, this covenant, and not flood the earth again.

We use tangible stuff to remind us of our own covenants, too. A common one is a wedding band. Do you need a wedding band to be legally married? No, of course not. But it's a symbol, a reminder, of a covenantal relationship that two people make.

Today we heard of another covenant, sometimes called the Sinai covenant or the Mosaic covenant. Either way, it's basically the originating covenant between God and the Jewish people. This comes after the people have escaped from slavery in Egypt and entered the wilderness. They used to be Pharaoh's people. But now that they're in the wilderness, they get a new story. God identifies as their God. And the people are identified not just as a random assortment of individuals but as God's people.

This is a familiar story to many of us. And at first glance, the reading we heard today is just a list of rules. But it takes on new meaning if we look for the physical reminder in it. What is the thing that reminds the people of their identity as God's people?

This is kind of a trick question. Because the answer isn't a thing so much as a practice: sabbath. Practicing sabbath becomes the way that this community remembers the covenant with God. When the people were enslaved in Egypt, they worked for Pharaoh every day. But now that they are God's people, they will have a day on which they don't work. And that day reminds them that they are God's people. The thing that reminds you of God's covenant is an embodied practice.

The reason you practice sabbath isn't just so you can recharge your batteries and then crush it when you get back to work. You practice sabbath to remember who God says you are. Six days a week, you deal with what other people tell you is urgent. But one day a week, you focus on what's most important.

Sometimes when Christians think about the Jewish tradition of sabbath, we imagine it as just the absence of something. It is just about cutting things out. But in practice, it's really about bringing the most consequential elements of your life to the front. There's a scene in the TV show "Fleishman is in Trouble" which captures this well. One of the characters, who's a Jewish man, is explaining to one of his friend that he goes to Shabbat dinner with his family on Friday nights. And his friend is perplexed by this and asks, "But what if you have to be somewhere else?" To which he responds, "Well, where else would you have to be?" In other words, what's more important?

In practical terms, twenty-first century mainline Protestants don't really practice sabbath in the same way as many of our Jewish neighbors do. But the Christian tradition does have some elements of this within it. One that you come across periodically is called asceticism. When you hear the word ascetic, you might think of someone like John the Baptist or a monk sitting in a barren

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cell. Asceticism comes from the Greek word for “training.” And sometimes we think of it as shaping our desires. So it’s a word that we often associate with self-denial or giving something up.

Asceticism frequently gets a bad rap, perhaps deservedly, because we think of it as just cutting things out of our lives, denying ourselves, and—let’s be honest—making ourselves miserable. In this season of Lent, for example, many Christians give up something like chocolate or alcohol. The rationale that people often give for cutting stuff out of their lives is because they want to improve themselves in some way or the way to sympathize with the sacrifices of Jesus. But that kind of asceticism runs the risk of making discipleship into a diet program (Not the point of Lent.) or trivializing the passion and resurrection of Jesus (I know the pain of our Lord because I gave up Diet Coke.).

But the ascetic practices that developed in the early church were really asking a much more fundamental question, one that the authors of Exodus are also getting at and one that’s much more useful to us.¹ When I go through life on my default setting, in my normal habits and routines, what are the things that I’m relying on? And what might those habits covering up or inhibiting? To put this in the context of Lent, which is all about remembering God’s baptismal covenant with us, what are the things that prevent me from trusting God and loving my neighbors?

You can imagine some ways this might play out in our own lives. Maybe when we experience conflict, we rely on other people to tell us that we’re right and correct and good. And so our self-righteousness is always getting in the way of our connections with other people. Or maybe when we feel emotional discomfort, we dull it with substances. And so numbing pain prevents us from taking steps to heal it. Or maybe when we meet someone new, we rely on various status markers to tell us how we should interact with them. And so our preconceptions prevent us from really encountering them as whole people.

In all of those cases, we aren’t just getting rid of something for the sake of getting rid of it. We’re getting rid of it so that we can create space for what’s actually important. What’s actually true. What’s actually life-giving.

In Martin Luther’s explanation of the sabbath in the Small Catechism, he says that honoring the sabbath is all about hearing and receiving God’s word. And by “God’s word,” he meant God’s promises. God’s promise that you are forgiven. God’s promise that you are valued. God’s promise that you are loved.

And whenever we assemble for worship—remembering our baptisms, hearing God’s word, celebrating the Eucharist, and being sent out to serve—we bear God’s promise in our bodies, too. So that everyone we encounter on the journey of life would hear God’s word of grace and truth. They are more than their mistakes. They are valued beyond measure. They are loved without condition.

It doesn’t always seem urgent. But there’s nothing more important.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ I think this is from a Sarah Coakley lecture. Can’t find it now.