**October 3, 2021 – “Blood of the Covenant”**

Genesis 15: 1-11, 17-21, Romans 4: 13-25, Mark 14: 22-25

This morning, as we pray through and reflect on the Scriptures we have just heard, I want to invite you to consider with me the word “Covenant” and what it means to us as Christian people, as followers of the Way, Jesus Christ.

Today, on World Communion Sunday, Christians across the world, from across the spectrum of denominations will all take part in the Sacrament of Communion.

Millions of people, will, in hundreds of languages; remember the story we have just heard about Jesus with His disciples, they will recall, they will give thanks, and they will participate in the “blessed mystery” whereby we are made one with Christ in the drinking of wine and the eating of bread in remembrance of Him.

As we have just heard, when Jesus instituted this meal, he called on his friends, his disciples to understand what was happening, to *understand* this bread which is His body, and to *understand* this wine (or, in our case, juice) which is his blood, Jesus called this blood “the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many…”

So what is “Covenant”? What does it mean?

If we look through the Scriptures, (if we consider the Gospel as the present-tense of Scriptures) and if we look *back* in the Old Testament (as we did in Genesis), and if we look *forward* into the Epistles of Paul and the other Apostles (as we did in Romans this morning), we will come across this word many times, very often in the first two books of the Old Testament (Genesis and Exodus), a lot in the stories of Abraham and Noah and Moses, but also plenty of times in the last books of the New Testament, the Epistles, those letters which were sent between the early churches and the early church-leaders.

In fact (I did a little googling on this), of the 344 times that the word “Covenant” is used in the Bible, it is used 313 times in the Old Testament and 31 in the New Testament, and of those 31 it is used a total of 4 times in all four Gospels (just enough for Jesus to talk about his bled shed for the “covenant” in each version) and the other 27 times are in the Epistles.

Ok, that’s a lot of Bible trivia; why does it matter?

Let me spoil the ending by giving the Good News now:

It matters because the reality of “Covenant” and especially this “new covenant, made in Christ’s blood, poured out for many” is the reason we are *here.*

Covenant is the reason we are here.

It is the reason we have faith.

It is the reason we gather for Communion.

It is the reason that millions of Christians are also gathering for Communion today.

Covenant is *who we are* as people; called, saved, and justified by Jesus Christ on the cross.

We, as Christians, as a church, should talk about “Covenant” all the time! It’s super important, it tells us who we are and what we are about and what we want our orientation to God to be!

I think the only reason we don’t is because we think it is legalistic and dry (boring!); not interesting or important.

At the level of definition “Covenant” is rather dry: it’s a legal contract, it’s a binding decision, it’s what makes lawyers and actuaries and notaries excited and the rest of us glaze over.

But consider this:

What is *the* most important moment of your life?

Seriously, take a second and think “what is the most important *moment* of my whole life?”

I really mean “moment” not day or week or season.

Where were you?

What were you doing?

Who were you with?

Maybe you were standing before your friends and family and the love of your life in a church.

Maybe you were in a delivery room, welcoming your child into the world.

Maybe you were at an adoption centre, signing the form to take your son or daughter home.

Maybe you were taking ownership of something; a house, a business; fulfilling a lifelong dream.

What is that moment for you?

Even though we tend to think of contracts, or legal transactions as boring, each of these examples I gave, and likely the actual “moment” in your mind, involved a legal agreement or decision.

When I do marriages, and I got to do one about a month ago for a childhood friend, which was a lot of fun, I like to ask people “What do you think is the moment that this marriage becomes official?” Most people think it’s the “I do” and the kiss, but actually it’s the *moment* the license is signed. If you are looking for an exact moment two people are married, it is the moment the last signature is put down.

And yet, if these moments were *only* legal, they wouldn’t be the most important of our lives, would they?

If marriage were *just* “a piece of paper” as people say, it wouldn’t be worth crying tears of joy over, it wouldn’t be worth fighting for, it wouldn’t be worth the heartbreak and the heart-healing that takes place in marriage. No.

Likewise, with a birth certificate or adoption paperwork, or the deed to the family farm, or the business license that made you your own boss.

When you finish signing and lift the pen off the paper, something has changed.

At that moment, you *transformed into a new thing:* a father or a mother, a homeowner, an entrepreneur, a husband or a wife.

In the 1992 film *Glengarry Glen Ross* there’s an amazing scene where Alec Baldwin berates a room full of unsuccessful salesmen for seven whole minutes, (“Put the coffee down, coffee is for closers!”). The climax of this very angry speech is the line “Only one thing counts in this life: get them to sign on the line which is dotted.”

There is no sale, there is no marriage, there is no Covenant until we “sign on the line which is dotted.”

That’s true in the most important moments of *our* lives, and it’s true in the most important moments of humanity: Abraham’s Covenant with God and the Covenant fulfilled for us by Christ on the Cross and risen from the empty tomb.

God has entered into Covenant, into *agreement* with us, and because of that, we (and the world) are changed: God is ours and we are God’s.

We have signed on the line which is dotted.

Except, there’s a little twist to that, let’s go back in the Scriptures and see.

In the reading from Genesis this morning, we heard about the first Covenant, made between God and a man called Abram. The story goes like this:

One day Abram (a not-very-important-person in his time and place) received a vision. It said:

“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

And to this mysterious vision, Abram responded with doubt. Abram was, after all, nearly 100 years old, he had always wanted a son, an heir to his name and his small plot of land, but he and his wife Sarai (later Sarah) had given up on that dream a long time ago:

“O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

And then God blows his mind. God brings him outside and he says:

“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them… So shall your descendants be.”

Despite all of Abram’s (very reasonable) doubts about having a son, despite Abram having never heard God speak until a moment before, despite his advanced age and his poor place in the world (what God would want to make a Covenant with me *anyway*?). He believes.

He believes.

Really think about this: You are walking along, living your normal, everyday life, and all of a sudden God, the creator and sustainer of the universe shows up in a vision and says “Hey, I want to make a deal with *you*.”

How do you react?

 “Uh, I think you have the wrong person?”

 “Are you sure? I don’t really have anything to offer”

 “Look, to be honest I’m not that good at keeping promises”

But no matter what you say, God persists, and says “believe it or not, it’s you, I want to make a deal, a Covenant, what do you say?”

At that moment, if you could find the faith to just say “OK” (and if your name was Abram and it was thousands of years ago), that little “OK” would be enough to found a nation, to make a whole law, to build temples and kingdoms, to defeat armies, to bless millions of people, and eventually, to save all of humanity from sin and death.

This little “Ok,” this little “I believe,” this little mustard-seed-sized grain of faith made all of that happen. And Paul expands upon this in our reading in Romans, I invite you to ponder it later.

Now, as Paul correctly points out: Abram doesn’t *make* any of those things happen. He can’t. He’s not God, he’s just Abram, but his Covenant partner (who is God) can and (because of this belief) does, and that is why it is not just belief but *righteousness*; faith; small and humble enough to save the whole world.

God is God, God is eternal and infinite and all powers, and yet He is loving and self-giving enough to bring humanity in on the deal, and actually, much more than that.

Before we get there though, we have to finish Abram’s Covenant with God.

As Abram and God speak, they work out the terms and conditions of the Covenant, and then it is time to “sign on the line which is dotted.”

And thousands of years before fountain pens and notaries, this is how deals were done.

God says:

“Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon”

So Abram brings the animals and without being asked, he cuts the larger ones (the heifer, the goat, and the ram) in two, and the birds he kills and leaves whole.

How did Abram know that he needed to kill the animals and cut them in half?

Because back in these days, this is how Covenants between *people* were made.

Two leaders, two chieftains, or even two business partners would take an animal, cut it in half, and then the Covenant partners (or usually just the weaker member) would walk between the pieces as they made their oaths; effectively saying “If I break this Covenant, if I betray you, if I don’t pay my debts, may I become killed and cut in half as one of these animals is.”

Abram knows what is coming. He has made the initial deal with God, he has worked out the terms and conditions, he has gathered the animals, slaughtered them, and cut them in two, and he is busy keeping the birds from pecking at them, all he is waiting for at this point is for God to tell him “Go” and he will walk between the pieces and make his oath.

Except that’s not what happens.

After it was dark, God appeared again to Abram, this time as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, this is how the story goes:

*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”* Hey wait a minute!

God did it wrong? Didn’t he?

Shouldn’t Abraham go through the pieces, isn’t he the weaker member, isn’t it him who has to live up to the deal? Why does only God make the Covenant oath?

By doing this God covers both sides of the oath; His and humanity’s. He effectively says “if either of us break my promise (and by the way I’m God, I don’t break promises) then may *I, God* be slaughtered as one of these animals.”

Why would God do this? Why would God make himself the weaker member (and more so) in a Covenant with an obscure man thousands of years ago?

It’s a Covenant, someone needs to sign on the line which is dotted, so why is it only God?

That’s the big question isn’t it?

If God is so great, so powerful, why does He put His skin in the game?

If God is God and we are human, why does He promise on His flesh?

If God is Lord why does He show up later in history as a weak and vulnerable teacher and healer, and not as a conquering hero?

Friends, if you think back to that moment that I asked you to remember a few minutes ago…

If you think back to that wedding, to that birth, to that adoption, to that purchase of land, or business, or title, or whatever that moment was for you,

What were you willing to give up at that moment?

As one member of the deal, as one Covenant member, what were you willing to give up for that deal to happen that day?

You probably gave up some money, definitely a lot of time and commitment, maybe some independence, maybe even your name, either to lose or to share with a new person. Whatever you gave, I hope it was worth it, I really do. It’s not easy to make those kinds of sacrifices, even when you are sure you’re getting something greater in return.

Now let me ask you this, if God showed up in your life and offered you everlasting peace and a living relationship with Him, what would you be willing to give up?

If God interrupted your day, like he interrupted Abram, what would you be willing to put on the table in trade?

Money? Commitment? Independence? Would you be willing to make an oath between halves of slaughtered animals?

The Good News this morning (and every morning) is that when it comes to this deal, this Covenant, God has done it all.

God has done it all.

God has drawn up the Covenant, God has made the promise, God has entered into relationship with us, God has taken the oath between the slaughtered animals, and God has done something even more amazing than that.

Of the three major religions that draw their lineage back to the Abraham story: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is only one that says God kept this promise *in His own skin.*

There is only one that says “when God promised to lay down His life for the sake of this promise to humanity, not only did he *literally mean it* but He literally *kept* it.”

A few thousand years after the Covenant with Abraham, after the Covenant was broken and mended (what?) 313 times throughout the Old Testament, God remained faithful to the deal that He had made; and seeing that we, in our humanity, couldn’t keep up our end without His help, God kept His promise.

He, God, the maker and sustainer of the universe, came in human flesh; vulnerable and weak, in order to fulfill our side of the Covenant in our own humanity.

And while He knew this adventure would end in only one way, with His own death, His own Covenant promise fulfilled, He still taught and healed and proclaimed the Good News as He went toward that cross.

And He even had fun, He even ate and celebrated with His friends.

And one day, while he was eating with His friends, He taught them what it meant to be His Covenant people, what it means to come without price, to receive without measure. That all who eat the bread and drink the cup, have a place in God’s kept promise.

Friends we believe, that in a few moments, when we eat the bread and drink the cup together, we take our place in this eternal covenant between God and humanity; made between Abraham and God, and renewed at the Lord’s table.

As we do so, let all who choose to partake do so freely, that we may renew our Covenant and have peace with God, with one another, and with all who partake in it the world over this day.

In celebration of God’s kept promise.

Amen.