

**Yr. B, Lent 3**  
**March 4, 2018**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1409Words**

**Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17**  
**Psalm 19**  
**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**  
**John 2:13-22**

If you conducted a word count on the Old Testament lessons we have heard during this season of Lent, I believe the winner—hands down—is the word ‘covenant.’ This is not a word we use regularly in our daily lives, and that is our loss. A covenant is a partnership defined by vows. It is weightier than a contract. A contract is temporary. A covenant is for *life*.

Covenant partnership between God and humanity is the crux of the Holy Bible. Despite humanity’s infidelity to our covenant vows, the story of God is one of steadfast adherence to the covenant no matter what. This is why we often hear it described as *Berit Olam*, ‘The everlasting covenant.’ As I said, a covenant is for life, and God’s life is everlasting. *Berit Olam*.

A couple of weeks ago we heard about the rainbow as the symbol of God’s everlasting covenant with you, me, and every living creature. The rainbow is the unmistakable sign that points to God’s covenant desire for life and peace on earth as it is in heaven. God hung up his weapon, the bow, in the sky for all to see. What we can see is that God leads by example!

Last Sunday we heard about elderly Abraham and Sarah, but the story was once again about God’s everlasting covenant. God makes a covenant vow with Abraham that—*through him*—all of humanity will be fruitful, diverse, and blessed from generation to generation. God gave us a common ancestor for all to see. What we can see is that God wants us to have life and peace as children—sisters and brothers—of this large and diverse earthly family.

This morning we heard the Ten Commandments, but the story is once again about God’s everlasting covenant. God spoke these words to Moses in order to tell his children to stop being slaves for someone else, and to start living a life of freedom and peace. God gave us the law for all to see. What we can see is a pathway to abundant life and peace with God and with our neighbor.

The invitation I offered to you on Ash Wednesday was to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word. This morning we will use the Ten Commandments as a guide for self-examination. In a few moments we will kneel together to pray and meditate on God’s holy Word.

After all, the promise of the Psalmist is that “The law of the Lord revives the soul.” With the Psalmist we just proclaimed that “The commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light to the eyes.” What we can see when we pray the Ten Commandments is just how imperfectly we follow the pathway to abundant life and peace with God and with our neighbor. Martin Luther (of the Reformation) helped teach the Church that perhaps the most valuable aspect of God’s Law is to reveal our hopelessness in achieving righteousness on our own.

Our everlasting temptation is to use the Law to judge other people, not ourselves. Our temptation is to *mis*-use the law of God to justify *our position* at the expense of others...and for the exclusion of others. Even though the rainbow is a common sign of God’s desire for life and peace on earth, we find legal ways to justify death and discord. Even though we have a common ancestor revealing God’s desire for us to live peacefully as his children, we find legal ways to justify exclusion and neglect. And even though we have the Law as a guide for *our* feet to walk in the way of life and peace, we find legal ways to restrict other people from God’s grace.

According to John's Gospel, less than two weeks into his ministry Jesus went up to Jerusalem and directly confronted the duly appointed religious and legal authorities who were doing their jobs according to the Law. I want you to notice what was happening at that Passover Festival in Jerusalem.

Even though the rightfully appointed leaders, merchants, and money changers were just doing their job, the effect of their perfectly legal enterprise was to erect a barrier around God's House. They were using the Law (as we do) to justify their position at the expense of others...and for the exclusion of others.

Make no mistake. What Jesus did that day was an act of religious and civil disobedience for the sake of the everlasting Covenant. Jesus knew—better than anyone—that God's everlasting covenant for all people is abundant life and peace...whether they could afford the price of the money changers and animal merchants or not.

Even though the money changers and merchants were doing what was legal, their barrier to God's mercy was still improper and unacceptable. You see, God's grace is not for sale to the highest bidder. God's mercy is priceless—that means it is *without price*...it cannot be bought.

John's account places today's Gospel scene at the very beginning. It sets the tone for everything else in Jesus' life, as he enacts God's everlasting Covenant of life and peace for all people, above everything else.

So, when people from all over the country show up in Jerusalem to eat the Passover Lamb in celebration of how God had opened the way to a life of freedom and peace. Jesus, himself, revealed for everyone to see...that he is the Lamb of God, clearing the way—literally pushing aside the merchants and flipping the tables of money changers—so that even those *without money* can access the Temple. Even *those people* deserve to have life and peace with God.

Predictably, the duly appointed legal authorities confront Jesus. "Who do you think you are? What sign can you show us for doing this?"

Now, Jesus knew the signs of the everlasting covenant with God:

- the rainbow, signifying life and peace for all to see.
- Abraham, our common ancestor, signifying life and peace for all to share.
- The Law of Moses, signifying how to live abundantly and peacefully with God and one another.

But this is the sign of the everlasting covenant Jesus used to answer their question. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." All of the literalists thought he was talking about stones and mortar. They failed to see that a building cannot fully contain what is sacred. Bodies and souls do that. God does not raise up *a building* above everything else. God raises up *people* above everything else.

And so, of course, Jesus speaks with the voice of God as he re-enacts the same everlasting covenant as the lamb on that first Passover night, opening the way to a life of freedom and peace for *all people*, above everything else. Clearing the way for *all people* to access the abundant and priceless mercy of God.

When we pray to Jesus, we are praying to the One who takes away all of our sins that get in the way of abundant life and peace. And so we pray: Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. *Have mercy upon us.*

When we pray to Jesus, we are also praying to the One who takes away the barriers erected by other peoples' sins that block the way of abundant life and peace for all. And so we pray: Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. *Have mercy upon us.*

When we pray to Jesus, we are praying to the One *through whom no thing and nobody* can separate us from the love of God. And so we pray: Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. *Grant us your peace.*

This is perhaps the most fitting prayer we can pray after we remember how “Christ, *our* Passover (Lamb), is sacrificed for us.” It is he—the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world—who clears the way for us to access Holy Communion with God. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who opens the way toward freedom and peace with God and with one another. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who perfectly fulfills the promise of God’s *Berit Olam*...the everlasting Covenant for life...and peace.

Indeed, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast.

Amen.