

Third Sunday of Lent - B

The primary theme of the readings provide during this year's Lenten season is covenant and the renewal of the covenant when it is broken. That theme is played out most clearly in the readings taken from the Old Testament.

You will remember that, on the first Sunday of Lent, we heard the story of Noah and the flood, and the covenant God made, not only with Noah and his family, but to all creation:

Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, since the desires of the human heart are evil from youth; nor will I ever again strike down every living being, as I have done.

And God placed a rainbow in the sky as the sign of the covenant he had made.

Last week it was the covenant with Abraham that took center stage. God promises Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, and then appears to go against that promise by asking for the life of Isaac, who is the promise's embodiment.

Abraham proves his trust in God by not refusing his son, or the promise made by God and God rewards him by preserving the life of his son and giving him an undeniable experience of God's own fidelity to the promise he has made.

This week Moses is the central dialogue partner with God. We can often make the mistake of thinking that

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the covenant with Moses is the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, but by the time that happens, God has already established the covenant. He has freed the people of Israel from slavery and proclaimed to them that that he will be their God and they will be his people. God acts unilaterally in establishing the covenant. It's his free gift. Of course, no one in their right mind would refuse the offer, especially if it meant freedom from the backbreaking penal servitude of life in Egypt!

What about the Law, then? It is a further gift, a wedding present, if you will, from groom to bride. The Law was the sign of the covenant—one that would provide the people with a means for making the most use of the relationship God had forged with them.

If they followed the dictates of the Law, they would flourish. The prescriptions of the Law were designed to make living together in community work well. They were not designed as a means for God to impose his will in some arbitrary, capricious demonstration of who's boss.

Unfortunately, the history of the covenant of God with his people is replete with failures from the human side. We are not done with recounting the history of all that. We still have a couple more Sundays in Lent to round out the story.

But already now we can see how faithful God is to his own promises and his own nature. Even in the face of our refusal to hold up our end of the bargain, with

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devastating consequences, God always finds a way to re-instate the covenant of love he must really want with us, to give us another chance to be faithful to it.

This week, as part of our efforts to come to terms with our own failures in fidelity, we could take the 10 Commandments to hand, and use them as a particular examination of conscience, so that we can prick the balloon of our fantasy and honestly acknowledge that our fidelity to the covenant with God comes nowhere near his fidelity to the covenant with us.

For the truly ambitious, you could even take a look at the third section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which provides an extended reflection on the Christian moral life organized around the themes found in the 10 Commandments. I'm sure you would find the exercise enlightening and fruitful.