

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on February 18, 2024.**

COVENANT

<Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

In his groundbreaking book *Start with Why*, business author Simon Sinek posits that “people don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it.” His theory, shared with organizational and business leaders across the country and around the world, is the call to clarify your guiding belief, your “why” as the foundational aspect, and then let everything else - including what you do or the product you make - fall into place after that. The issue, Sinek goes on to propose, is that all too frequently companies, organizations, and even individuals, get the process backward and reversed, and then wonder why it is ineffective. I believe in this perspective, that we must first start with clarifying our “why,” and that Lent is a prime example of this. Because, all too often as we enter the season of Lent, we focus on what we’re going to do - either a practice or habit or item to give up, or a habit or practice we want to try and take on to create in our lives. And in that focus, we place ourselves into a less-than-faithful dichotomy of either succeeding or failing. And I have been guilty of that, too.

I remember the year I gave up coffee for Lent. I thought Lent was all about the denying one’s self of pleasures and, in an attempt to mirror Jesus’ self-denial in the desert, I figured there was some aspect of my life I needed to give up for the season. So I picked coffee, and for six weeks I changed my morning routine.

It was not fun.

I tried tea, which occasionally mitigated the need for caffeine or the desire for a warm drink in the early hours of the day. But it wasn’t the same. And I wasn’t the same. After a week or so not only was I somewhat miserable, but so were the people who had to be around me. I thought that I needed to give something up, and picked coffee, but all that I remember of that experience is the negative.

I also remember the year I gave up watching any television or movies for Lent. Again, I thought that Lent was a season in which I needed to noticeably deny myself some thing, some practice, some pleasure in order to prioritize my desire to be faithful. My roommate at the time, a film and television studies major, was less than thrilled with me and my choice.

But what I remember most about those years, about those Lenten attempts at fasting and other such attempts, was how guilty I inevitably felt when I slipped up and didn’t live into the commitment I had made. When I gave in and had a coffee. Or a sweet. Or watched part of movie surreptitiously from the adjacent room. Ultimately, I slipped up in my conviction because I had not clarified my conviction. I had an idea of what I was doing, but not why I was doing it. In all of it, I was thinking in terms of doing something to gain/accomplish something. I was not thinking in terms of a covenant, or what impact that would truly have on my life.

It's important in our lives of faith to remember that we are a people of covenant. More than a legal agreement, which is often transactional - you provide A and I'll give you B in return - a covenant is designed to be relational. For instance, you as a congregation have not simply hired me as your minister. We, together, have covenanted to be in ministry together, each bringing our particular gifts and unique experiences. We are in relationship with each other, toward a common goal: the living out of the Kingdom of God and the proclamation of good news.

Rather than a contract, a covenant speaks to a deep, abiding relationship. And like any relationship, there will be ups and downs, ebbs and flows, times when we get it just right and times when we mess up a bit. But in such a covenant, in such a relationship, the journey together, mutually, is the determining characteristic.

And God has established a covenant with us from the beginning. Echoes of it can be glimpsed in God's interactions with Adam and Eve in the Garden, but scholars agree that the interaction with Noah which we read this morning is perhaps the first formal covenant made with humanity and creation. A covenant to be in it together.

God has been displeased and disappointed. Even to the point of sending the flood so as to, quite nearly, wash the slate clear and begin again. But in the aftermath of this, God realizes that it is too extreme, and thus a covenant is created: Never again will such an event happen. Forevermore life will be honored and lifted up. Even if humanity should again be so wayward, God will not send such destruction. Even if disappointment should be so present, God will not respond in such a way. Such a covenant is living and dynamic, ever-present. And there is the sign which reminds all parties of its existence: the bow in the sky. As God says, "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh..."

This is a covenant of living. This is a covenant of Life. And in this covenant is the love of God made manifest and lived out.

We are reminded, as we begin again the season of Lent, that Jesus, upon his baptism, went in the Spirit into the wilderness. During this time he fasted, and was tempted by Satan, and so we think that we, too, must fast. That merely mirroring and mimicking Jesus is the purpose of these weeks. We're not wrong in that, but if our understanding stops at that point then we're not right, either.

I don't think Jesus went out into the wilderness for forty days just to fast and endure temptation. I believe Jesus went into the wilderness, in the Spirit of God, to draw close to God. To not only remember the covenant but to be filled with the covenant. To embody within himself the fullness of the covenant of Life. Why? So that he could bring it to the world that needed to be reminded of covenant, as well. To bring it to the people who needed to live in the covenant again.

From Jesus' baptism, to his time in the wilderness, to the ministry and teaching he would bring to the world, comes the reminder of who we are created to be, and the caliber of the life we are called to live, the covenant from which we find our definition. We claim this reminder again at the beginning of Lent, and the imposition of ashes. Bishop Deon K. Johnson re-words the Ash Wednesday liturgy in this way:

“Remember you are dust, the substance of the stars, animated with the Breath of Life. Uniquely formed in the image and likeness of Divine Love. Authored in hope, forged in joy, very good of very good, no accident we, this beloved quickened dust, knit to love and be loved. Remember you are dust.”

The covenant of God with all of creation is the relationship of the Divine with the stardust which bears the Divine Image, and breathes air through the very Spirit of God. Why did Jesus come into the world? To remind us of this covenant, and help us to live into the fullest realization of it. Why did Jesus go through temptation in the wilderness? To show us that, even when trying, the covenant gives us strength to live. And why did Jesus die and be resurrected? To show us that death is no longer our definition. That was his “why.” And it is our “why,” in this season, as well.

Why do we fast or engage in spiritual reflection and practice during the season of Lent? To live into the fullness of God’s covenant of Life. Why do we seek to commit each new day to these practices and this way of living? To prioritize and live into the relationship we have with God.

We must start with “why.” No matter what we may try to do in faithful living, we must begin with why we are doing it in the first place: because we are in a covenant relationship with God. And the covenant of God is that we are to live into Life. A fullness of life for us; the fullness of God’s vision realized. It is not a matter of trying to sell a product in the world, but rather it is the invitation to reprioritize the covenant relationship we have with God. It is a covenant for living a full, meaningful, purposeful life. Whatever we may do, particularly in this Lenten season as we seek to draw closer to God as a community, as a communion of faith, let us start again with the covenant God has made with us and with the world. Amen.