



A Covenant of Grace

Book 1

LENTEN
DEVOTIONS
FOR 2024

GRACE
LU⁺HERAN
CHURCH
& SCHOOL

A Covenant of Grace

Welcome to our Lenten devotion series for 2024. Our theme this season is “A Covenant of Grace.” Throughout the Old Testament, God promises again and again to be faithful to the people, despite their recurring faithlessness. During Lent, we’ll explore these promises and how they all find their fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How is God living out these promises in your life? How is the Holy Spirit calling each of us to be signs of the promise today?

Acknowledgments

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Cover art: Michael Berg, 2024

All readings are taken from the NRSV unless noted otherwise.

Grace Lutheran Church and School
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To What Do We Cling?

February 14

Matthew 6:21

Rev. Troy Medlin

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This passage reminds me of Martin Luther's explanation of the first commandment. He writes in the Large Catechism, "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is your God."

In my teens, I spent a lot of time cultivating political and theological convictions. I lived in a silo of sorts, spending most of my time and energy around folks who shared the majority of those political and theological convictions. My views got reinforced much more often than they got challenged. I even remember telling someone that I was so confident in what I believed that I would never change. Fast forward to today and in certain ways, I have become the person that I used to despise.

I clung with white knuckles to those positions, my heart confident in my own attempts to justify myself, more than the God who justifies the ungodly.

There are other things I cling to these days from small possessions that I protect with outsized care or my bank account. It is so easy to let those things wrap themselves around our hearts until we find our value and worth in them. Treasuring them.

We all cling to our life. We hold so tightly to our reputation, appearance, positions, and security, believing the lie that those are worth treasuring and protecting with everything we've got. Our hearts get turned ever inward.

We forget that our life and all we have come from the God who has first clung to us and who will never let us go. This mighty fortress is our only source of true security and salvation. God is the one who is always faithful to God's covenant and promises. In baptism, this God has replaced our heart of stone with a heart of flesh.

This Lent we are invited again to let go. Fall into Christ. Die and be raised. Turned outward by faith we are free to treasure our neighbors. And step into freedom.

God of promise, you are always faithful. You hold us in your embrace. By your grace may we let go of our lives so that we may treasure you and our neighbors above all things. Amen.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and look — we are alive, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

An old friend called me last week
with tears in her voice
to tell me she is dying.

We talked of old times. Of better times.
Of trials endured. Life experienced. Friends in common. Uncommon encounters.
I was able to make her laugh.
We spoke a fond farewell.

There will be a time to mourn, but that time is not now.
I was never really good at it anyway.
My knack has always seemed to be able to say something to lighten the load.
and I know this about myself and am glad for it
because it needs to be.

To rejoice in the midst of sorrow.
You see, all of us are dying while yet we live. It is a natural function of life.

As we commence this season of Lent, we can see why
it is so important that Jesus has joined us in our human condition.
He knows my experience here in the middle of this mortal coil;
my pain, my temptations, my joys and my grief.
He's been there because he's been here. He's here yet.

If you have ever experienced a near-death episode, for example, while undergoing serious surgery, you might have been blessed by the knowledge that the transition is not really that difficult; indeed, it is warm and bright and welcoming and almost a shame that returning to the temporal is even necessary.

But you do return. Your loved ones are not ready for you to leave.
There remain tasks to be completed. People to be uplifted.
Forgiveness and love to be bestowed as it has been to us.
Life to be lived.

So, here's to life and its circumstance.
We never know when that handshake, I love you, *bon mot*,
fist bump, conversation or hug will be the last. So, sow freely.

Lord, we praise you for life and its delicious dichotomies. We want to thank you for the people we encounter in our path because they are the very reason we are here. Amen

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Psalm 51:12

Today's verse, and the verses that precede it, were sung into my mind at an early age. Growing up, our family's congregation celebrated Holy Communion only twice a month. On the other Sundays, we did a truncated version of the liturgy that included "Create in me" instead of "Let the vineyards" as an Offering Verse. Even so, I noticed something new while reading this verse in preparation for writing this devotion.

Heard through the lens of childhood faith, I tend to focus on what's wrong with me. I need a "clean" heart and a "new" spirit. Certainly, this is true. But the psalmist gives voice to something else, too. The salvation we've been granted is certain. It's already given and cannot be lost! What we lose sight of is *joy*. So, we pray not for more salvation, but for restored joy.

To restore something is to put it back into its original condition or use. I have such strong memories of God-given joy. From singing silly camp songs in my youth to welcoming my own children as a parent, God has blessed me with moments in which joy abounds. Sometimes I lose sight of this, sometimes because I am forgetful and sometimes because life can truly be joyless. There is sorrow aplenty, sadness to go around.

In the midst of it all, salvation persists. It cannot be lost, for it is grace all the way down. Today I cry out for restoration. For just a glimpse of joy to see me through to tomorrow.

God of abundant joy, draw me anew to your heart that my heart may learn from you. In the midst of today's trouble, help me to know the depths of your joy that buoy us up in the midst of our sorrows. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

As I began reading this verse, I found myself singing it. Wait! How do I know this so well? I found it in the hymnal as part of the liturgy during Lent, sung just after the Second Lesson and before the Gospel for the day is read.

Reading this verse in *The Message* adds relatability for me.

Come back to God, your God. And here's why: God is kind and merciful. He takes a deep breath, and puts up with a lot, this most patient God, extravagant in love, always ready to cancel catastrophe.

Even when we don't deserve it, God is ready to forgive us. Like the most patient parent, God takes a deep breath, counts to 10 (or 20, or 100 or more), and extends grace and love. He's like the father in the parable, welcoming his repentant prodigal son back with open arms and celebration.

Recently I heard a television interview with an expert about parent-child relationships. She stressed how important it is that no matter what a child may do, they know their parent loves them and will stand with them to help work things out. The expert explained that a parent should be their child's safe space.

As children of our Heavenly Father, we can be assured that our parent loves us. We have a safe space, guaranteed for us through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Dear Father, thank you for loving us so much that you sent your Son to pay the price for our sins. Help us to remember that despite our sins, we can come to you and you are ready to welcome us back. You will stand by us, help us to work things out, and restore us to relationship with you. Thank you for being our safe space. Amen.

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Several weeks ago, I had the opportunity to teach Sunday School here at Grace. Working with first through fourth graders is not something I do regularly so, while fun and exciting, it took some focus as I relearned how to communicate at a different level. Most children at this age are only beginning to see the nuances of life and still defer to a more black-and-white view of the world. My biggest struggle was how to move them from the yes/no, good/evil, answer to a more nuanced understanding of mercy and grace.

I was challenged. Not because I did not know the answer or was incapable of teaching it, but because I was so caught up in my own ideas that I forgot to allow them to simply believe in God’s profound love for them. I could hear the inner monologue of my brain creating differently phrased questions to help them get to what I wanted instead of accepting their simple answer of “because God loves me.”

Our world is caught up in war and division. The argument seems to focus on “everyone should believe what I believe.” As adults, we analyze, consider, discuss, hypothesize, research, and study the opposing argument, so we can boldly claim “THIS is what should be. THIS is right.”

What if we didn’t? What if we simply believed that God loved us, that Jesus came to die and rise, saving us from our sins, and God will one day take us to heaven? What if we left behind all those elements considered *adiaphora* (things that are neither right nor wrong, such as church building design, eating pork, no meat on Fridays during Lent, etc.) and simply lived the faith of children? It’s easy for us to get lost in our esoteric thinking, our pride in knowing so much about the Bible, and our perfectly crafted theological responses that we forget the basics. God loves us. We sin. Jesus died and rose. We are forgiven. We go to heaven. The covenant we read here is this; we need for complex explanations or deep theological insight to know that we are God’s beloved. We are forgiven and saved. We need only rest in the reality that “Jesus loves me, this I know.”

Lord, help me to recognize daily that you love me. That knowing you is all I need in this life. Remind me that the faith of a child; simple, innocent, and trust-filled, is all you require of me. Amen.

It Only Takes One

February 19

1 Peter 3:21

Neal Armstrong

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

In January 1999, 11 months before I was engaged and 5 years before our first child was born, I spent 10 days in Israel with a group from my parents' church. It was an incredible experience and brought much of scripture to life. Some vivid memories from that trip include: climbing Masada and floating in the Dead Sea; praying at the Western Wall, staying in a kibbutz, walking through Old Jerusalem, seeing thousand-year-old olive trees at the Mount of Olives, drinking some sweet red wine in Cana, taking a boat on the Sea of Galilee, visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (believed to be the site of Jesus' crucifixion), and walking the Via Dolorosa (believed to be the route of Jesus as he carried his cross). My brother and I also enjoyed some of the local beers on occasion, Maccabee pilsner and Taybeh golden lager.

However, one of the most meaningful experiences during the trip was our visit to the Jordan River. The pastor was also on the trip and after reminding everyone that you are only baptized once, he facilitated a remembrance of our baptisms by touching everyone's forehead with water from the Jordan. His comments about one baptism being sufficient resonated with me. We are forgiven and extended grace because of Christ. That forgiveness and grace are applied to us in our baptism and cannot be taken away. How wonderful to know that even in our struggles with sin and temptation, God's forgiveness and grace remain constant. The experience was so meaningful for me that even though I was years away from having children I filled two plastic water bottles with water from the Jordan and kept them until the water was used to baptize my children, Sammy and Peter.

Just as my experience at the Jordan did, Lent helps us to focus on what Christ has done for us by dying on the cross for our sins. And because of what Christ has done, with our baptism we receive a flood of grace that washes away our sin.

Lord, please help us to remember that with our baptism, your grace and forgiveness are stamped on us because of Christ. Amen.

The Cost of Memory

February 20

Psalm 25:7

Al Swanson

Do not remember the sin of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

God, don't hold a grudge against me for what I have done in the past.

That is a straightforward plea in the psalm that applies to all of us.

Consider what holding grudges means to the society in which we live: drive-by shootings spurred by perceived slights, calls for retribution or payback against those who may disagree or oppose, or the urge to get even with someone for whatever reason, real or imagined.

We are human after all. And having these feelings may well be a human reaction to events in our lives. In business economic terms, balance the costs and benefits of carrying out these feelings. What price do we pay if we let a grudge dominate our thoughts? What will we gain from seeking revenge? What will seeking revenge cost me: a lost friend, a strained relationship, lost respect, or something more?

What if God did hold a grudge against us? The cost to God is a lost soul. No benefit to God there. Fortunately, God is not human. Through our faith, God leads us with compassion and love — love of ourselves, and our neighbors as ourselves.

Psalm 25 is more than a plea to God to forget our past actions and transgressions. It is a plea for God's compassion and love to deliver us from the past. The challenge for me is not to forget the event, insult, or perceived slight. Rather, the challenge is to put those feelings into the past, forgive, and then live a life of love of God and our neighbors.

This psalm is a plea to the Lord to forgive us our sins (vv. 11, 18) and to relieve the troubles in our hearts (v. 17). It is a plea for God to guide us to follow his lead — the real benefit to God and to us.

Lord, strengthen my faith and bring me out of the distress that carrying a grudge causes. Guide me to focus not on retribution or getting even but on what is truly important — trusting you and loving my neighbor as myself. Amen.

“When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

The God of the rainbow is our God of love, mercy, and hope. The rainbow is a sign, a reminder to God of his promise of mercy and love that he will never send a catastrophic event to destroy life on earth, but that he will sustain it. We know this because we know the story, we know his promises are true, and we know that the fulfillment of God’s promises was the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus, to save us.

We know this because we are his children. Like the rainbow is a sign for us, we need to think about how we can be signs to those who don’t know the story about God’s love. We can’t keep this story to ourselves, we must let everyone in on this good news by what we say and do.

As I volunteer at the Harmony Food Pantry, I see many people being signs of God’s love. I see little faces light up when my husband hands out little baggies of cookies and fruit snacks to occupy them while moms and dads are shopping, or the smiles and words of gratitude when another volunteer brings out a warm coat for a customer who has come in with just a sweatshirt. One volunteer stays outside for a while when he arrives just to talk to and greet those waiting in line. Many others work tirelessly for hours every week so that this place on Wednesday can be, not only a place to pick up food, but a place with people who greet them, pray for them, sometimes are able to call them by their name, and who wish them a blessed week. Twice a month these people know that they will be surrounded by people of God who love them when they come to the Harmony Food Pantry.

Each of these volunteers is a small sign of God’s love and promise of hope, but think of what large billboards of this message there could be if all of us became signs.

Dear God, thank you for keeping your promises. Cause us to think how we can be signs of your love in this troubled time when so many need it, and then help us to begin. In your Son’s name. Amen

God in the Storm

February 22

Psalm 29:3

Rev. F. Dean Lueking

*The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.*

Psalm 29:3 says a lot in a few words.

Meaning this: God's voice must ever be heard over the babble and misdirection of counter-voices all over the place, all the time. Such is the meaning of "waters" in Psalm 29, spelled out in the remaining verses.

I think back to a time just over 50 years ago in our Grace Church history when everything we now know and love as our sanctuary and school building was at stake. All this was challenged by a group within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, our denominational home at the time. It had been hijacked in the early 1960s by power-hungry folks seeking among other things to take over Grace Church and School as their own.

A legal battle ensued over our property. It continued through the 1970s, finally reaching the United States Supreme Court which ended it in May, 1985, by a ruling in our favor.

While fully acknowledging our sins and failures as well as those of our opponents throughout this wearisome time, Psalm 29:3 still speaks to us.

God has the last word, which is Christ's death and resurrection for us and for the world. That's the good news for us in every bad situation. Keep it first in your heart, mind, and daily doing.

Most powerful God, open our ears that we might hear your voice over the chaos of this world. Calm the noise in our lives and our hearts so we might know your guidance and direction always, and follow your word in our daily living. Amen.

Promises to our Fathers

February 23

Luke 1:72-75

Sandy Lentz

*“Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
in his presence all our days.”*

We are often called to look at a rainbow when one appears in the sky. “Come and see!” we hear. A beautiful arc of color. A rainstorm is over. Maybe even a pot of gold at its end, courtesy of popular culture

Luke records that Zechariah, a priest of the temple, after the birth of his son John, prophesied, reminding his hearers of God’s covenant with his people. That covenant, symbolized by the rainbow, was first a promise that God would never again destroy the earth with water.

The covenant goes much further, however. It is with us, his people down through the ages, a broader promise of delivery not just from flood, but “from the hand of our enemies.” I see this as a prophesy of the gift of Christ, who by his death and resurrection has delivered all his people from our “enemies” – sin and death.

What does that covenant mean, then, for us? We are promised Christ, and through his act, we are to serve without fear. Our part of the covenant, then, is to respond, not in fear, but in love, freed to serve wherever we are needed. Freed, then, to serve, not to earn salvation, which has already been gifted to us, but to serve in joyful response to that covenant.

Father God, remind us of your covenant, your faithful promise to us in your beautiful rainbow, but also in the beautiful faces of your people whom we freely strive to serve in your name. Amen.

Rainbow of Grace

February 24

John 4:3-5

Gwen Gotsch

He left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

Jesus is traveling through Samaria, where he'll have a memorable encounter with a woman at a well, promising living water to all who thirst, to all who worship God in spirit and truth. The grace is there for the taking, grace offered to all who see it, from Judea to Galilee and to the Samaritans who lived in between. Picture it as an arching rainbow of grace – living water illuminated by the true light, a sign of God's love and care.

Rainbows made with ink or dyes are everywhere: unicorn stickers on children's lunchboxes, rainbow flags, rainbow gradients around the color wheel. But a real rainbow is a fleeting thing – usually. It requires rain and sun at the same time; you have to be standing in the right place at the right time to see it. More than once I've stood outside in drizzling rain and looked for a rainbow that never appeared. More than once, I'm sure, I've hunkered down inside and missed rainbows that followed storms. (These statements are true in metaphor as well as in actual fact.)

I once saw a rainbow that lasted a long time. It was an early evening on a Saturday in spring. It was bright and strong in the sky as my daughter and I came out our back door, and it stayed with us for ten minutes or more as we drove south on Austin Boulevard. At every stoplight, every slowdown in traffic, I looked anxiously over my left shoulder to see if it was still there — and it was! It arched from North Avenue to Berwyn, but truly, it was everywhere – a friend texted me a photo of the same rainbow from her apartment on the north side of Chicago.

Like the woman at the well after her encounter with Jesus, I felt awed, blessed, and energized by this rainbow of grace – Living Water illuminated by the True Light.

God of Light, Lord of Living Water, give us eyes to see your grace and faith to carry it in our hearts, in sunshine and shadow, in drought and plenty, in death and in life. Amen.

He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

When Jesus tells prospective followers to "take up their cross," what does He mean?

In the Middle Ages, a wildly popular response was for men to paint crosses on their shields, saddle up their horses, and head for Palestine to make war against Muslims. The cross-bearers (English "crusaders", German "Kreuztraeger") were responding to an interpretation that does not serve well in our time. The Lutheran college (Susquehanna) where I graduated, fielded athletic teams called "Crusaders"; several years ago they changed the name to "River Hawks" to avoid offending Muslims.

Did Jesus ask us to give up our favorite luxuries for Lent? Somehow it seems that he had something more serious and more difficult in mind.

For many people, the agony of physical and emotional suffering from illness, injury, aging, or death of a loved one is a sad reality. For such cases, there is a cross to bear. But those who do not follow Jesus have these burdens also.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus tells us, his followers, to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, and to be kind to all without really expecting kindness in return. We are asked to forgive those who have harmed us physically, emotionally, or financially. These things are much more difficult than giving up something we like because of the season of the church year.

Dear Lord, who once had to carry a cross and die on it, give us strength to bear the burdens of life and even death, so that we may abide in God's covenant and be numbered among your true followers. Amen

For this reason, it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.

God's covenant promises that Abraham's descendants will be blessed by faith, grace, and more. Are you waiting to inherit something that belonged to your great-great-grandparents? That one priceless object that everyone knows was meant just for you? Everyone knew about it as if your name had been written on it before your parents were even born?

I was promised a clock with Westminster chimes that my Grandpa made sing while he cuddled me in his lap. Well, I never got it, but those sweet memories will always be mine! I inherited a grace covenant when God stayed by my side when my grandfather died. I was 5 and had never been in a hospital, and I wasn't there that day. I sat in my bedroom while my parents were with Grandpa, and the Holy Spirit opened my eyes and heart to see them there beside him. I saw the oxygen tent, and watched Grandpa breathe more and more slowly, until he peacefully exhaled the last time...and I inherited that peace — forever!

Grandpa was a man of faith, who now rested in the grace of eternal peace. I inherited the gift of knowing that when someone dies, God always shows up. This led to my becoming a pastor, therapist, and hospice chaplain. We are children of Abraham, and when we die we rise with Christ. That is the most priceless inheritance in the universe. Watching Grandpa die from afar promised me that we can trust the future because the future belongs to God!

God grant us the grace to live in resurrection faith knowing you have promised to love all of your children forever, as we seek to enjoy the blessing of the eternal peace we inherit through faith, both today and tomorrow. Amen.

Posterity
February 27

Psalm 22:30-31
Scott Schwar

*Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.*

This psalm expresses David's feeling of abandonment and the suffering he feels surrounded by enemies and criticism and the thought that God is not listening to his cries of anguish. In the first part of Psalm 22, David itemizes his pains. But he does not deny or forget God, and in the second part, he recalls God's faithfulness in all times.

In the past few years, I have had Sunday difficulties with work intruding on my time at the church I love. Feeling estrangement from some fellow parishioners has made necessary absences seem somehow justified. But as David moves from the cry of pain to the shout of praise, I too remember that God's ever-present love has nurtured me since youth and brought me salvation through Jesus Christ.

This was proclaimed to me in confirmation study and Luther League by Pastor Earl Bengston at Concordia Church (Chicago) and by my sister's father-in-law, Pastor Franklin Giese at Messiah Church. And later from Pastor Marc Braudal, Lutheran Church of the Atonement (Barrington), and from my 40 plus years here at Grace with Pastors Dean Lueking, Bruce Modahl, Michael Costello, and now David Lyle. As an active lector at Sunday worship, I served with Assistant Pastors including Peter Marty. In association management work, I served under a wise and good man, Robert Becker, whose wife, Vivian, became a Pastor, I attended her ordination which she shared with Phyllis Kersten who like other Grace Associate Pastors, Leon Rosenthal, Lauren and David Wagner, and Troy Medlin, reached out with God's good Word. And I will soon see my granddaughter's first communion as a reminder that the proclamation of God's deliverance is continuing in new generations.

Dear Lord, keep my heart focused on love of you and neighbor as I walk through the ever-present difficulties we humans cause ourselves and others. May we unite in the salvation you have brought us through Jesus Christ. Amen.

"I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."

From the earliest moments in time, God made promises to those who follow God's commands. He covenanted with Noah that God would save them from the flood, and then again that God would not again destroy the earth in such a way. In this passage, God's covenant with Abraham lives on today.

God's promise or covenant was with Abraham and his offspring throughout their generations. An everlasting covenant – everlasting is a long time! When we trace our faith back, we see that we as Christians share our lineage with Islam and Judaism through this same human man. We are bound together by the promise God made to Abraham.

God has continued to fulfill that promise made thousands of years ago; Abraham's children continue to flourish. Whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, we are still here, we see new generations being born into our extended family, and we continue to rejoice in the God of Abraham. Yes, we all consider God differently. But our beginnings are from the same man to whom God made a promise.

There are no qualifiers in God's declaration. Nowhere in this verse can you even sense a stipulation, a requirement by Abraham or any of his generations to follow. Simply "I will be God to you and your offspring." No "if you do this," or "as long as they follow this rule." Also, notice in this verse that God does not say "and you will be my people," another example of the gift of free will God has given us. If we, through the work of the Spirit, become followers, we know and recognize the promises. But even if we do not, God will continue to be God. God and God's promises are inescapable.

Timeless God, thank you for Abraham who believed in you, whom you declared righteous, to whom you granted an everlasting promise which has been kept over the generations. Help us to revel in the promises you continue to fulfill, promises of comfort, joy, peace, and eternal life with you. Amen.

He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations.

A college Old Testament professor used the word covenant so many times that his class named him Covenant. The nickname stuck to him from class to class, from one generation to another. The word covenant litters the Old Testament; it would be impossible to teach the subject without repeating the word over and over. He was a faithful teacher. He kept covenant with God and with his students.

Every word in Hebrew is rooted in a verb. As often as the noun covenant appears in the Old Testament, the verbal form “to covenant” never does. From other ancient sources, we know the verb means “to select the best.” But it can also mean “to bind.” I may be playing fast and loose with the grammar, but not so with the theology when I say God selects the best for us when God binds himself to us.

God bound himself to the people of Israel and they to him. The writer of Psalm 105 recounts the times in the history of God’s people when there seemed to be no way forward, but God made a way for them. The God of the covenant makes a way out of no way. That’s how the preachers in one mighty tradition of Christian preaching put it.

The incarnation is the chief way by which God binds himself to us. God in Christ takes on our flesh, our sin, our idolatry, and our death. He establishes a new covenant in his blood, shed for us and for all people. The grave is the last and greatest enemy. By Jesus’ resurrection, he makes for us a way out of the grave’s no way.

God binds himself to us at our baptism. God renews the covenant with us at the Lord’s Supper and as the gospel is preached to us and into us. In this covenant, God gives us all of Christ’s benefits to use in our lives and for the sake of others.

Heavenly Father, make us faithful stewards of the covenant you have made with us. We pray in the name of Jesus, your dear Son and our Lord. Amen.

For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

Paul, in the book of Galatians, criticizes his followers in Galatia for putting themselves back under the rule of law, a path to salvation that depends, not upon the promise of Christ's resurrection, but upon following Jewish law. Do Gentiles have to follow Jewish law before they can be saved by Christ? What does this covenant, this promise that Paul preaches about, mean?

We human beings are not always really good at keeping promises. January is seen by many as a month of New Year's resolutions, promises to be a better person. This past January I promised myself to practice the piano or the harpsichord every day and lose 10 pounds. That didn't happen. Lent is a popular time of promises, such as not eating meat on Friday or giving up alcohol. The question that occurs to me in the context of Galatians is, *can* we improve ourselves? How do our promises to ourselves compare to the promise of God?

Paul speaks of God's promise to Abraham who, as a 99-year-old, surely wasn't expecting much in the way of good fortune, but God's promise to him was an incredible blessing to all of his offspring. And it was not Abraham's good behavior that made this happen, it was the fulfillment of God's promise to him. Paul reminds the followers of Christ in Galatia that the promise of God in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus is the same kind of thing.

Do we need to follow a law to earn God's promise of redemption? Paul argues that we don't need a law to be blessed. When we accept God's promise, we are animated to enjoy the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What a blessing *that* is!

Dear Lord, indeed we need to follow the rules for this, that, and the other thing, but help us to focus on the joy of your promise. We know that that is where our happiness and our goodness abide. Amen.

Living Water

March 2

John 4:15

Anonymous

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

We are all familiar with the story of the woman at the well. What often gets glossed over is the reality that Jesus is in Samaria, "enemy territory." The feud between Jews and Samaritans began during the reign of Solomon and blossomed over time. By the time of Christ, the Jews hated the Samaritans so much that they crossed the Jordan River (significantly out of their way to the east) to get to the southern kingdom (Judah) rather than travel through Samaria.

Why is this important? Jesus *chose* to travel through Samaria. Not only travel, but he stopped for food and drink and rested in a public place where people saw him. Then he spoke not just to a Samaritan but to a female as well.

We discover the whole of her story in other passages but right here we see a woman whom everyone would deem unworthy having the nerve to talk to this man from Nazareth. How dare she! Can you imagine the scandal?

Nothing about this encounter would be surprising to us today. But then? The animosity between these two cultures was planted deeply in their cultural roots, gender roles were specific and enforced. That's not to mention what we learn about her later. She should not be making conversation with a stranger, and believers would be shocked that their Messiah should speak with her. There is just so much culturally wrong with this encounter!

Another moment of Jesus flipping our expectations. Jesus initiated the conversation; it was not an accident. He knew her. He called her. He offered her something and she quickly accepted. Did she know what she had asked for? Jesus did. He found nothing unacceptable about her. He does the same for you and me. He knows your sin and mine. But God also promises that our sin can never stand between us and the living water Jesus brings.

Holy God, you know us from the womb. You see our faults and our shortcomings, our sin and our stubbornness. And yet you love us. May your living water flow over us so we might be drenched to overflowing with your love and become water-bearers to quench the thirst of the world. Amen.

Where Is Your Temple?

March 3

John 2:18-19

Benjamin Chandler

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Temples were the stuff of pulpy novels and movies when I was growing up. Indiana Jones raided their treasure houses, Tarzan outwitted their evil priestesses, and Conan the Barbarian slew gargantuan snakes in their halls. Temples were ancient, abandoned by pre-Atlantean peoples, home to monsters, cultists, and treasures. And they were certainly not any part of real life.

Or were they?

Of course, temples were not always fantastical, but once were real, active, used places. The Temple in Jerusalem was the place where God came to be with the Israelites. It wasn't a place of golden idols and unmentionable horrors, but communion and worship.

In time, human greed imposed other roles on the Temple, such as the marketplace where Jesus cast out the hucksters a few verses before the one from today's reading. When Jesus is challenged on these actions, he claims his authority will be proven when the temple is torn down and rebuilt in three days. His critics thought Jesus was talking about the building, but his followers later realized he was talking about himself.

Jesus is not only predicting his death and resurrection here but also changing the place where God meets humanity. The meeting place is no longer in a stone and wood building—it is Jesus himself. The Temple becomes a person and personal.

Yet, Jesus is not the final temple. After Jesus ascends to heaven, God sends the Holy Spirit to reside in each of our hearts. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, *we are now the Temple*. God comes to meet us in us. The story of God's connection with his children is one of coming closer and closer. As our eyes and hearts open to him, he is ever more present.

The temples of fiction are great places for thrills and spills, but they are nothing like God's living temples. You and I get to be the place where the Lord meets humanity as we do his work, follow Jesus' example, and spread God's message and love. It's a temple more alive than fiction ever could have invented.

Lord, help me remember that I am your temple. Let the Holy Spirit fill my heart so I may do your kingdom's work in this world. Amen.

Where is God?

March 4

1 Corinthians 1:22-24

Paulette Reddel

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

“A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles?” In our Corinthians text, I could sense Paul’s frustration with these groups. He wondered why they struggled to see Christ for who he was: redeemer, shepherd, servant. Did the Jews and Gentiles not understand God’s call to them?

In my early years of teaching (not at Grace School) I had two third-grade students, Tommy and Chris. Tommy struggled academically and socially but Chris had the opposite experience, students gravitated to him.

One afternoon at recess I heard angry shouts of “You’re out!” “No, I’m not!” Back and forth the third graders bickered. Suddenly I saw Tommy take off for a far corner of the playground shouting, “It’s not fair!” I signaled to another teacher to watch the class as I frantically rushed out to him. Once again, I felt inadequately prepared to help.

As I debated in my head how best to de-escalate the situation, I saw Chris running to us. When Tommy noticed him, his sobbing subsided. He seemed relieved to have Chris nearby. The three of us just stood there and looked at each other. Now what? I wasn’t sure how this was going to end.

“Tommy, sorry about the game,” Chris said. Then, after a pause, he added, “Mrs. Reddel, I could say a prayer.”

All I remember now about that prayer is the *Dear God* and the *Amen*. But something truly holy had taken place during that encounter and I had known enough to keep silent. Shortly afterward, we returned somewhat lighthearted to the building to join the class.

A young nine-year-old had cared deeply about his classmate. He understood that his friend needed help and he did not hesitate. That afternoon, the light of Christ had shone brightly!

Dear God, help us to be your servants, answering your call, and following where you lead. Amen.

The Rock
March 5

Psalm 19:14
Rev. Karl Reko

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

We recently bought new cell phones; the phones were out of date the week after we bought them. My computer tells me to install an update almost every week. Our insurance company, benevolent agencies, health services, and ball teams change their names frequently. Our doctors and car mechanics need to spend as much time reading up on the latest as they do on their tasks.

I used to think that I was pretty good at keeping up with change. Now I feel like I am a bystander sitting on the sidelines and watching it happen, wondering at what point it's absolutely necessary to get involved.

Every day the world presents us with new situations and new anxiety-producing challenges, not to speak of the modern versions of evil in politics and nationalism. In the midst of all this change, the psalmist calls God a rock and asks that the writer keep his thoughts and meditations compatible with the rock. This is no small task today.

Rocks are usually not where it's easy to walk. But surprisingly it is in these very places that we more clearly find *the Rock*. This is what our Lord exemplified when in his worst hour he was able to say, "Into your hands I commend my spirit" In Psalm 46 which tells us to "Be still and know that *I am* God." and in Exodus 20 which says, "*I am* the Lord your God," we hear the Gospel message to stop, listen, and open ourselves to the presence of the "I Am."

The very pragmatic word for us this Lent, as we face our daily anxieties, is to just as daily get in touch with the Rock. The regimen doesn't come naturally. That is why the psalmist asks God to give the writer suitable words and meditations for a rock-solid loving Father. That is where a life of patience, endurance, and promise lies.

Our Father, the Rock on whom we stand, let us find you today and all days in our midst. Amen.

A Call to Freedom

March 6

Exodus 20:1-2

Rev. Rebekah Weant Costello

Then God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

My first call to ordained ministry placed existential questions before me and the congregation I served: Do we trust in the God who brings us out of slavery, or do we pledge allegiance to a Pharaoh-like tyrant – a large endowment fund – to secure a flow of money into the church coffers to keep the doors open?

Following the governing strictures of the endowment fund, we kept the church doors open, but in doing so, we also restricted our mission to one of keeping the doors open. Under such bondage, could we count on those doors to serve as portals through which God's people could pass from stifling slavery into joyous freedom; from cold death into resurrected life? That any church doors can serve as such portals is a matter of unequivocal allegiance to the God who promises to bring us out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and into the freedom of the Promised Land.

I am now five years into my second call. The congregation where I previously served has since closed its doors. Dare I say, in doing so, they trusted the Lord their God to shut the doors to financial bondage, to free their assets from old strictures, to unshackle their people from slavery, and to release God's people into the promise of resurrection hope.

Through the pain of it all, I have witnessed the divine drama that moves from death to life. Some of the assets loosed from my first congregation's ministry have been resurrected within the congregation I now serve. Some of the dear people I served in my first call have walked through the doors of new life-giving faith communities, even the one I now serve.

God has delivered God's people from slavery and brought them into the freedom we now share in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Unequivocally, God is faithful to God's covenant people.

Lord, we pray that our church doors might be portals of your covenant's promise to deliver your people from slavery and into the freedom of the gospel. Amen.

Out of Slavery

March 7

Psalm 119:11

Rev. Bob Shaner

*I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.*

The Exodus is the central, pivotal Old Testament story for the Judeo-Christian covenant people of faith. God's loving deliverance of our ancestors out of Egypt from slavery to the promised land is God being ever faithful: "I will be your God and you will be my people." God delivers on God's promises bestowing undeserved gifts of life, freedom, and redemption...a new beginning.

Now fast-forward to Holy Week and we behold again this covenant God who on Good Friday delivers the ultimate freedom over sin, all the demonic forces of evil, and death itself. On the cross one beholds God's limitless love, "Do with me what you will, but I will never forsake or abandon you."

Oh, freedom — can anything be more precious? Free from bondage, from demonic powers, from slavery to sin, from anything that imprisons self or the spirit — God sets me free from all the distortions controlling my life, holding me captive, keeping me from being the person I could or should or want to be. The Lenten journey is a movement to freedom. Martin Luther King, Jr., 61 years ago in his "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, eloquently personalized this freedom in the old spiritual: "Free at least; free at last. Thank God Almighty that I am free at last!"

So, freedom! What does it mean to be free from addictions, seductive values that subvert life, broken relationships, the slippery slope of "gain at the expense of others," freedom to have a future, to live with options, have choices, to experience "meaning, worth, and dignity," to move from death to life, to worship a "living God?"

Enslaved, we desire freedom and so does the world. Living in a historic time of epic upheaval and mass human migration where people are seeking safety, dignity, and a future of hope and promise, freedom is not simply some esoteric value, but an existential matter of life and death. Surely one of the most dominant contemporary events in the struggle for freedom is the immigration crisis which has become a "nation/state" (even local community) issue — a mass inequity in the human family, a quagmire of human struggle, frequently a topic for scoring political points, and a mirror often reflecting self-centered values, exposing many communities' bottom-line: "not in my backyard."

What does it take to learn that when my neighbor is enslaved, so am I? The covenant God who delivered Israel from slavery is the Calvary God who redeemed the world and a God (2 Corinthians 5:19) "who has entrusted to us this ministry of reconciliation," this message of covenant grace, of peace in our relationships, and freedom for self and neighbor...reconciled to the world and self!

In mercy, we ask for eyes to see, ears to hear, a heart to love, a mind to comprehend, a will to serve, and a life filled with compassion and thanksgiving. Lord, in your mercy, grant such unto us. Amen.

Forgivable Failure

March 8

Hebrews 8:6

Dan Lehmann

But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.

Martin Luther helped us understand the importance of law and gospel. These two covenants are the basis of our lives with God.

The covenant God struck with the Israelites in the Old Testament featured a code of moral commands. Throughout the time before Jesus Christ, God repeated his promise to be faithful to the people of Israel while they repeatedly failed to live up to God's commandments. In Jesus Christ our God started something new not just with the Israelites but with all humanity.

A recent cartoon in a local newspaper helps frame this situation, at least for me. "Grandma" is in bed. Her thought bubbles say, "I can't sleep ... because I lie in bed remembering every bad mistake I made over the course of my entire life. Where are my senior memory problems when I need them?"

Like Grandma, I'm regularly reminded of my shortcomings in life, dredged up at moments like bedtime. But I don't need memory loss to deal with them. I know I cannot fulfill the law to receive the "sleep of the just." Instead, I know our Redeemer came as "the mediator of a better covenant," known to us as grace. Jesus wiped our sins away. While we still need to attempt to live by the law, our failures are not unforgivable thanks to our Savior's death and resurrection.

While intended for a secular audience, public interest lawyer Bryan Stevenson tells us, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." As Christians, we can rest assured in that statement thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and share that assurance with those around us.

O God, thank you for the new covenant found in your Son. Keep us mindful of the law while living by the grace found in faith in you. Amen.

Do Where and How Matter?

March 9

John 4:23-24

Jennifer Murtoff

“But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

In this passage, Jesus addresses the Samaritan woman, who has attempted to redirect his probing into her personal life by raising a theological question: Jews worship in Jerusalem, Samaritans on Mount Gerizim. Which place is correct? Jesus avoids a direct response, instead offering up a future where people will worship in “spirit and truth.”

As I reflected on these verses, I considered what it means to worship in spirit and in truth. I’ve experienced many forms of Christian worship in different denominations and cultures: Anabaptists singing in carefully controlled four-part harmony; Pentecostals being slain in the spirit; Catholics joining in corporate contemplation; Colombians rejoicing exuberantly and unabashedly off-key; and African Americans making a joyful noise with tambourines and energetic dancing.

Having grown up in a reserved Anabaptist congregation, I’ve often experienced discomfort in traditions not my own, be they more expressive, more liturgical, or less harmonically inclined. Should I trade my preferred harmony and orderly chord progressions for less-scripted vocalization and physical expression? Echoing the Samaritan woman: “Should we worship here or there? In this way or in that way?” In these verses, Jesus says that worship should be an act of integrity from one’s spirit, unconstrained by denomination or culture. Our own acts of worship should seek to acknowledge the worthiness of God and express reverence and thanks for who God is, rather than focus on rituals, liturgies, and places of worship.

On the other side of the resurrection, the New Testament admonishes Christians to offer ourselves as living sacrifices: Our very lives themselves are part of our worship. The message of the Gospel removes the need to “worship in Jerusalem” — in one place, in one way — allowing Christians all over the world to contemplate the road to Calvary and the joy of Easter, in spirit and truth.

Father God, as I observe this Lenten season, may my reflections and actions be from a place of spirit and truth, pushing through prescribed words, prayers, and songs to a deeper connection that brings my heart more in tune with yours. Amen.