

A Nation Establishing A Covenant

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a great delight to have you all here this morning. I thought after last week we would go into a summer relapse and probably not recover for several months, so it's very nice that we're all here again this morning.

And the celebration has been celebrated, and we go on with the work of the parish. And there is a wonderful passage of Scripture to look at this morning, which is Deuteronomy 9, verse 9, to the end of the chapter.

And you might find it helpful to turn to that in your pew Bible so you can follow just what I'm saying. It is what is called an archetypal story. It's a story which recurs in the Old Testament.

If you want the long version of it, it's Exodus chapter 32, 33, and 34. And you can read it there, though it's in a more condensed version, here in Deuteronomy 9, verse 9 following.

And by a wonderful miracle of the grace of God, it has to do with a nation establishing a covenant, which is what we've been involved in for the last tortuous weeks through which we as a nation have gone.

[1 : 16] And in this story, as it begins, Moses said, I went up the mountain.

Well, mountains are famous. And Moses went up one, and 40 days and 40 nights. And after 40 days and 40 nights, he was given the terms of the covenant written by the finger of God on tablets of stone, the covenant God was making with his people.

And while he was in the midst of doing that, the session was interrupted because Moses was told, as you will read, go down quickly, your people.

It's interesting that God doesn't say my people. He says, your people, Moses, that motley crew which you've led for 40 years, your people.

And you know what they've done? They have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside from obeying my law. They have created for their own worship a molten image.

[2 : 36] So the Lord says, these people have turned away from me. These people, with whom I am on the very point of establishing a covenant for all eternity, these people have corrupted themselves, turned aside, and now they are worshipping a molten image.

Parallels are staggering. The Lord, who had brought this nation into being by a promise to Abraham, turns away from the nation as they turned away from him.

The people turned their backs on the Lord. The Lord turned his back on the people. And so God says, I think what I will do is I will start again.

And this was what Moses figured the Lord was going to do. I'm going to take you, Moses, because you're the only person who knows me. You're the only person who understands me.

You're the only person that knows what it's all about. And I'm going to build a nation out of you, your offspring and your children. And that's going to be the nation.

[3 : 52] This people have turned away from me, and I'm through with them. Well, there's a lot of people in our country with a Moses complex this morning who think that God's going to take them and build a nation around them.

And they're difficult people. Moses didn't even listen to this proposition from the Lord, as you will see if you read it carefully. And the Lord said to him, they are stubborn.

I will destroy them. I will blot out their name so that they will not be remembered again. Having said that to Moses, Moses came down the mountain, the mountain which at this point it says was burning with fire.

So Moses came down the mountain, and he said to the people, You have sinned against the Lord your God.

You have made yourself a molten calf. You have turned aside from the way that the Lord has commanded you to go. That's what he said to the nation.

[5 : 02] You've sinned against the Lord your God. You have made yourself a molten calf, an object of worship that is the product of your hands, and you have turned aside from the way which the Lord commanded you to go.

Very sober. So Moses takes the tables of the covenant, the agreement with God, and he picks them up and throws them to the ground, and they are smashed.

The covenant is finished. There will be no more. I will no longer be your God, and you will no longer be my people.

Because a people without a covenant cease to be a people. Forty days and forty nights without bread and without water.

Because, Moses said, of all the sin by which you provoked God to anger. Moses said, I was afraid of the Lord's hot displeasure against you.

[6 : 18] He was ready to destroy you. He was so angry with Aaron, he was ready to destroy him. Now, it's interesting that there are two leaders here.

One is Moses, who's been up the mountain dealing with God, and the other is Aaron, who's been down in the plain dealing with the people. One of them was listening to God, and one of them was listening to the people.

And because Aaron gave up the trust which had been given to him as the high priest of this nation, and had led them in gathering the gold and making the molten calf, Moses says that God was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him.

Two kinds of leaders. One that listened to God, and one that listened to the people. And there you have these two men, Moses and Aaron.

And so, Moses said, I prayed for you to the Lord, and he heard me. I prayed for Aaron, and he was saved. And then he said, I took that molten calf, and I burned it, and I ground it up, and I threw it in the brooks of water, the sinful thing, and I contaminated the water, and made you drink that water.

[7 : 50] That you may take to yourself personally the impact of the contamination which has been done by creating this molten image.

that truth of what you've done will enter into your guts as you drink this water. Well, Moses then goes on and says in about verse 22, he said, this isn't the first time.

He said, at Tabara, you complained. At Masa, you were put to the test, and you failed. You complained about manna, and you wanted flesh to eat.

You had a craving that you couldn't let go. And then there was the massive unbelief at Kadesh Barnea when I said to you, there is the land that belongs to you.

He said, you didn't believe me. All you saw was the problems, and you didn't believe the promise. So, there you have it.

[9 : 02] Four things that this nation had done which displeased the Lord. They had questioned God's plan for their life.

They did not believe his promises. They did not obey his commands. They were in a constant state of rebellion against the Lord.

That was his people, his chosen people, his church. So, Moses prays, 40 days and 40 nights.

The Lord has said he will destroy you. And Moses prays, and he says, addresses God, O Lord God. Then he petitions God, and he says, destroy not thy people and thy heritage, whom thou hast redeemed through thy greatness. Thou hast brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

[10 : 01] Look at the investment that you've made in this people. you have redeemed them through your greatness. You have brought them out of bondage and out of slavery by your mighty hand.

Don't destroy them. Don't at this point destroy this nation. And then, Moses reminds God, and he says, remember, remember thy servants, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

The new covenant in his blood, which we celebrate in this communion this morning, is a covenant which God says to you, remember.

remember. And when we pray to God, we say to him, remember. That's the exchange of prayer. He prays that God will remember and that he will forget.

He will forget the stubbornness of the people, and he will forget the wickedness of their sins. and then, Moses sets out in his prayer to blackmail God.

[11:16] And he says to God in this story, he said, as soon, do you know what this land will say? He says, they will say, they will trumpet what you might call in modern language, they will trumpet existential despair.

And they will say, the Lord was not able to bring them into the land which he promised. The Lord actually hated those people, and the Lord has brought them out to slay them in the wilderness. Do you see how the land turns against the Lord and says, you are not a God who is able, you are not a God who loves, but a God who hates.

You are not the God of life, but your purpose is to destroy. That's what the land will say about you, Lord, if you don't hear the prayer I make for this people.

You know how it echoes in our ears every day. The Lord is not able, he does not love, the Lord destroys, he doesn't bring life.

[12:41] That's what Moses said they would say. What they would say then, and what indeed they say now. Moses concludes his prayer by saying, they are thy people, they are thy heritage, whom thou didst bring out by thy great power, and by thy outstretched arms.

And you see what a sobering thing this is for us as a nation at this particular juncture in our history. You can only appeal so long to the teeming waters and the breadbasket of the prairie and the steel bonds of the railway that bind this country together.

You can only boast of our French heritage and our English heritage. You can only point so long to the purple mountains that stand as a symbol of the everlasting God.

You can only talk about the great white north for so long, but at some point you've got to say, what is at the heart of this nation? What covenant have we with God?

you can only for a while accuse the polluters as the ones who are doing the damage. You can only for a while blame the economists as the one who have brought us to the point of despair.

[14:10] You can only blame for a short while the heavy hand of government or the paternalists for being paternalistic. You can only for a short term get any satisfaction out of idolatry.

Those things don't last. A country does not exist by the covenants signed by the shores of some distant lake.

Men's signatures mean nothing ultimately, as one of our politicians said yesterday. The only covenant by which a nation can survive is a covenant with God acknowledged or unacknowledged by the people of that country.

That's the only way. A covenant in which God dictates the terms, a covenant that you know will cost you your life, those are the terms of the covenant and the demand that it makes on you, as indeed that is the demand that it makes on God.

The only covenant by which a nation can survive is a covenant which is available to every ethnic group, a covenant which is available to every language, a covenant which is bigger and greater than the color of your skin, the language of your tongue, the heritage of your culture, your ethnic origin, your economic theory, your political party, your religious denomination, your educational superiority, or your bank account.

[16:00] covenant. It's got to be bigger than all of those. It's got to be a covenant that's available to the people of God, and the people of God have to bear witness that this is the covenant by which a people prosper, and that is the covenant with God himself.

And you see, our land has done the same thing. Our land has said, God is not able, God does not love, God is out to destroy.

It's almost as though you took that picture there and cut out the risen Christ and lift up your hearts and only looked at the bottom half. and at the center of the bottom half is the covenant between people.

And that covenant between people doesn't work unless it is primarily a reflection of the covenant that God has made with us through Christ.

That's the only covenant by which a people can live. That's the only covenant by which we can survive in this modern world. and that's a covenant which can be appropriated not by ten men in a distant city but a covenant which you as an individual person can enter into with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and on the basis of that covenant you have an identity which transcends all the barriers that exist between our humanity.

[17:50] human beings cannot between themselves establish a covenant. They can only respond to the covenant that God has established.

And let me remind you of that in the words that come at the end of the epistle to the Hebrews. Hebrews. And I want you to hear that those verses on this day. It says the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ the great shepherd of the sheep there are other flocks I have which are not of this fold by that. The shepherd who has been brought from the dead and who is the great shepherd of the sheep says by the blood of the eternal covenant that covenant by which and from which mankind can only find its meaning in terms of that covenant with God. May this God of peace equip you with everything good that you may do his will and that he may work in you that which is pleasant in his sight and this work he does through Jesus Christ to whom be glory forever and ever.

[19 : 31] I think our country needs to be prayed for. I think it needs to be prayed for for reasons that we can't begin to comprehend but it's somehow that the central covenant known or unknown on which we as a nation and we as a world are utterly dependent is that covenant by the God of peace who brought again from the dead the Lord Jesus through the blood of an eternal covenant.

That's the only basis that we are asked to discover as we in obedience to God gather to do this in remembrance of him and of the covenant in his blood.

And as we do that we pray to God to remember us as a nation and as people and to remember us as a people on this broken planet.

Amen. Thank you.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your law, which persists despite the best efforts of men to do evil.

[21 : 52] Your law is the blueprint of your kingdom. We acknowledge that unless we build with it, we labor in vain. Thank you for giving us, for the asking of it, your kingdom here and now, in the working out of each of our lives.

As Moses crushed and burned the molten calf, give us victory over the behaviors which we have allowed to crowd out our time with you and our allegiance to you.

Give us more vulnerability and openness.

Make us brave to turn from self-protection and self-centeredness and to open ourselves to others.

Please give us the courage to be weak in the eyes of the world.

Lord, the confusion in our country's politics has discouraged many.

[23 : 05] We are at a time when it seems that a restructuring of our country's political arrangements is underway. We pray that your spirit be among those appointed for this work, and that in particular you be with the Prime Minister and the newly appointed leader of the opposition through the months ahead.

Forces which would deny you any part in our country are at full spate, even as we pray that you will be with us. Closer to home, we face a period where our church building will literally be restructured, and we pray for all who are given authority over that work.

We want your purpose, not ours, to be served in the end. As summer comes, we thank you for the seasons and for the glory of your world.

We think of all of the Bible study groups who will be making various arrangements over this summer. We ask that you give the people who provide leadership in those groups wisdom, and that you bring each and every one of us into a Bible study group in this church, in which we will be best able to learn and to serve you.

At this critical time in the transition in Christian education in our church, we ask for your guidance again in the choice of people to be leading this important work.

[24 : 54] And we ask for your strength to be with those people. Help us to learn to pray.

We recognize how easily we turn away from your word, how constantly we must be called back to it, with what difficulty we ponder your word, and with what ease we allow ourselves to be distracted to the things of this world.

We will end with the prayer for relatives and friends, to be found on page 732 in the wine-colored prayer book.

And we will read together.

Amen. Amen. O loving Father, we commend to thy gracious keeping all who are near and dear to us. Have mercy upon any who are sick, and comfort those who are in pain, anxiety, or sorrow.

[26 : 32] Awaken all who are careless about eternal things. Bless those who are young and in health, that they may give the days of their strength unto thee.

Comfort the aged and infirm, that thy peace may rest upon them. Hallow the ties of kindred, that we may help and not hinder one another in all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Amen.