

***An Offer You Can't Refuse***

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25**

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As I was thinking about how to title the sermon today, realizing that we are in a cycle of covenant stories from the Old Testament, and knowing a thing or two about how God makes covenants, I thought up what I consider to be a somewhat catchy title, which you see in your bulletin, "An Offer You Can't Refuse". On the one hand, I happen to think it's not half bad as titles go. It's within the cultural vernacular. It expresses the pointlessness of resisting God's grace to us and God's gracious designs for us. And more than anything, it appeared to my mind to be at least a little bit evocative. And so as chance had it, I was clicking through the channels last week and saw that on American Movie Classics *The Godfather* was playing.

"Great," I thought, "an offer you can't refuse. I should watch some." Now, I like that movie, but please don't think I got any ideas from it. Don Corleone's idea of what constitutes an offer that cannot be refused differs a bit from the Bible.

No, on second thought, I take that back! In Genesis 15, we actually get the equivalent of waking up and finding a horse's head in the bed! Abram falls into a deep sleep, and God appears in a dream and makes a covenant with him. It's roughly the same covenant that we read today, but it's told from a different author's perspective. You know that Genesis has multiple authors. And so we often get different perspectives on the same story.

What you need to know about covenants before we go any further is that they are serious. I haven't recently seen reports of major sports stars renegotiating their contracts, but if I remember a few years ago, there was a rash of renegotiations for in-demand athletes. As they looked at the compensation packages that their peers were receiving, and then looked at their own, they decided it was a fine time for renegotiating right in the middle of the contract period. That seems to me to belie the whole contract concept, but that's an opinion for another day. The point is, when God makes a covenant, it sticks. It doesn't change.

I'm pretty sure I've told you all about the practice of sealing a covenant in the ancient near East. It was called "cutting" it. The practice was to take an animal and cut it in two, the size of the animal being proportionate to the importance of the covenant. And so you would cut the animal in two, and the two parties would walk between the two sides of the animal to signify, "may thus and so happen to me, if I do not keep my word." Abram fell asleep. God made the covenant, divided the animal. Similarities to *The Godfather* should be becoming disturbingly obvious right about now. God walked between the halves of the animal that had been divided. And then, in a surprise move, God passed again between the halves of the animal - this time for Abram - understanding that the size of the

commitment - the importance of the covenant - was one that Abram couldn't keep.

And so God took Abram's obligation on to himself rather than allow Abraham to do it, which may beg a troubling question: Do we worship a coercive God, who makes us an offer we can't refuse?

Human beings have an absolutely wonderful capacity for idolatry. We are remarkably capable of making just about anything into God. We don't do it as much now as we used to with those heart items, you know -- the ones made out of wood, or stone, or perhaps concrete and steel.

I think we do more now conceptual idolatry. We let our ideas take precedence. That is essentially the tack taken in the modern atheistic dialogue. Long before we were graced with the opinions of certain celebrity atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and Lance Armstrong, or a 19th century theologian and philosopher by the name of Ludwig Feuerbach suggested that whatever we see in God is the projection of ourselves. Now that is a tempting trail to go down, both intellectually and therapeutically - that we can determine what we see in God by looking at ourselves. And certainly if our goal is to be critical of our own idols, that's not a bad idea. We can look at what we think about God, at what we admire and perhaps what we fear, and see how it shapes our images of who God is. But, the risks we run when we do that is that we will stop asking questions about who God is and what God wants from us, and ask instead who we are and what we want to gain from God.

In other words, this is a great way to do anthropology, but not such a hot approach to theology. The story we read today isn't so much a story of a coercive God that makes an offer we can't refuse. You see, we might look into the text and see ourselves reflected back, encounter that image of God. But if we look at the text rightly, we see instead a God who won't go away, a God who provides, a God who blesses. We realize this is not so much a story about *The Godfather* as it is about the father-God.

Now I know there are some folks who are uncomfortable with images of God as Father, for whatever reason. So if you think about this as a story of the giver-God, that works too. The reason that works is because this is a story about a God of providence. Think of the root word. That root word is provide; this is the God who provides.

When God makes a covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham, it is not because God suddenly now has overwhelming confidence that Abraham, who's had a name change, has suddenly had a personality transplant and is going to get things all of a sudden immediately right. No, it is because God wants to say, "This is who I am. Look at this and know who I am and what I am like. I am the God who gives." That would stand sharply in contrast to all the other

images of God the time of Abraham would have contained -- images that would have been idols, pagan idols, who would have demanded a sacrifice to be made, in order to ask a change on the situation at hand. And in contrast to that, Abraham's God, the God of Israel, says "No, I am the God who gives." And the God who gives is the God who forgives us.

If we read our Old Testament, and by read I mean not going back to it and pulling out the sensational bits and ripping them out of context with no idea of what the authors meant or understood. I mean if we really read our Old Testament and think about what these stories tell us about God, about God's ongoing care for creation, God's ongoing commitment to the covenants that God has made, then Jesus shouldn't come as a huge surprise to us. The God who makes covenants, the God who provides, is the God who becomes a covenant, in order to show what God is like, to show who God is.

In Mark's Gospel narrative, Jesus says he says is going to suffer and be rejected, and to die and be raised again. What we see once more is the giver-God who suffers on behalf of God's creation. We see the covenant at work.

I'll grant that when we begin to look at the covenant theology of the Old Testament and the New Testament, we can get into deep water pretty quickly. Let me see if I can distill it to one sentence: The God of the covenant is the God who provides for us and for our salvation.

That is the language of the confessions. This is the God who is going to do what needs to be done in order to save us from sin. That is the God that Jesus is pointing to in his troubling words about suffering, rejection and death that we encounter all through this season of Lent. That is the God of grace. You remember what grace is -- it is the free, unmerited, unearned, unconditional love of God. That is grace that comes at a cost.

But sometimes, cheap grace is just a little bit more appealing. You remember what cheap grace is. Cheap grace is when we look at what God has done in Jesus Christ and we think to ourselves - "You know, what Jesus did really didn't matter so much" - and therefore, what we do doesn't matter so much. We take the grateful response piece away from it.

Lent is the season when we say no to cheap grace. We say no to the idea that we can go right on sinning because God forgives and that frees us up to do we want. Lent is the season of penitence, in remembrance, where we look at what God has done in order to make course changes in our lives, make corrections at times, live gratefully in response to what God has done. It's not so we can earn grace; that goes against the very nature of grace, and not because we think we're suddenly going to become non-sinners. In a moment of honest confession - I think we all recognize that is not the case - but so that we may take seriously the grace that God has given us.

This past week, I read a wonderful story in a colleague's article I'd like to share with you. "In one church I know, every week the worshipers are invited to offer their spoken prayers. And every week one gentleman says, 'Lord, sweep the cobwebs from our souls.' Week after week that would be his prayer. One week, right on cue he said, 'Lord, sweep the cobwebs from our souls.' Another voice in the church said, 'Dear God, kill the spider!' I know the feeling. God just get rid of whatever it is that keeps me having to come back to you with the same confessions every week. I am tired and I'm ready." A parishioner in another church I served said to me, 'I am tired of my same old sins. I feel like trading them in for some new ones.' I knew what he meant, don't you? After all, other people's sins are always more interesting than our own."<sup>1</sup>

Lent is the season where we look at our own sins, however interesting we may find those of other people. I get so tired of Lent by the time Easter rolls around, don't you? We're only in week two, and I'm already bored with hearing myself talk about sin. But for Easter to have any meaning, for Easter not to be cheapened by the belief that what Jesus did really doesn't matter, because what we do doesn't matter, then we must remember that when we break covenant with God, when we break communion with each other by our actions and our inactions, and even by our attitudes, that it's sin.

Sin is the state of brokenness. It is the reality of the *Shalom* for which God hopes, for which God dreams. The *Shalom* for which God made all of creation has been vandalized and violated. *Shalom* is the peaceable well-being that God wants for all of us, down to the very bedrock of our lives, to rest in a sea of grace and mercy and communion that supports us and enables us to support each other. That is *shalom*.

I have a wonderful embroidery in my office, given to me a few years ago. It hangs just to the right of my desk. It says *Shalom* in English and Hebrew. What I love about it is in the midst of this circle that's delineated by the English and Hebrew words *shalom*, there is a dove carrying a red cord. And if you read the Old Testament, if you read Genesis, you'll remember that red cord is carried for the theme throughout Genesis, reminding us of all the ways in which God keeps the covenant, regardless of what we do. God remains faithful to the covenant that is made on our behalf. First we encounter God's covenant with Noah, which we discussed last week. That's the one where God decides - *I will be for humanity*; never again will destruction cover the earth. And then the covenant with Abram in the 15th chapter, God says to God's people, "I need you to go, and by the manner of your lives show people that you encounter what it means to be my followers. Show them by the manner of your lives something about who I am." In the 17th

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Copenhaver, *On Doing the Thing I Hate* in The Journal for Preachers. Lent 2012, p 38.

chapter that covenant is restated, and God says to Abram, "I will be God to you and to your descendents forever." God is saying, "I will be with you."

What is so fascinating about when we encounter the establishment of the covenant in the 17th chapter of Genesis is that unlike the 15th chapter where Abram is in a deep sleep, while all the gory details of the covenant are carried out -- in this version of the story, God forgoes all that old language of cutting the covenant, and just simply gives it - a free gift. God voluntarily takes on the obligation to be God for us throughout our lives as a gift free and simple. Indeed the verb that indicates the completion of the ceremony - the Hebrew word *karat* 'cut' - is avoided. God gives. God establishes the covenant, and the only word of completion, retells Abraham about it, God just gives it to him! This massive covenant obligation that God is taking on, at least in this version of the story, God just gives it to him.<sup>2</sup>

Why? Because our God is the God who provides; our God is the God who gives. So when we look at our sin, when we take it seriously and confess it, it is not for the purposes of continuing in sin. That would be to cheapen grace. But it is decidedly in the knowledge that however we have failed, however monumental our failures have been -- if they are parenting failures, if they are failures in our vows to our spouses and partners, if we have failed our friends by letting the bullies have their way, if we have committed a crime, no matter the offense, no matter its magnitude, there is more grace in God than sin in us.

The reformer John Calvin was noted for having said that whenever the church brings its sins to God, it is always, always done in knowledge of the faithful activity of God, and what God has already done. Worship, he said, the very act of worship should begin with the assurance of pardon. Think of that! Beginning worship with the assurance of pardon that Christ has died for us. Christ rose for us. Christ reigns in power for us. Christ even prays for us. There is nothing then that we can't take to God.

And that isn't only true here at this table. It's true out there in the world because wherever we are, the God of providence goes with us. The God of giving and forgiving goes with us. As Abraham's descendents, this is the God to whom we point. We point to the God who gives.

Friends, come to the table that God has set, knowing that it is a gift. And go from the table that God has set, as God's people, with the gift of grace to share.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1972) p199, insertion mine.