

“On that day, the Lord made a covenant”

- There’s just something about a good jigsaw puzzle, isn’t there?
 - Atticus has just recently figured out how they work- it has a puzzle with about 5 pieces in it and asks me to help him
 - I’ve only put together a few of the adult size ones myself, and only two that I really remember
 - As you have probably guess it, one was a Star Trek puzzle¹
 - And one was a picture of a big dragon² like you might imagine from the *Hobbit* by JR Tolken
 - Both of these puzzles were large, around 1000 pieces or so, and so many of the pieces had similar colors
 - These puzzles require dedication and persistence- and they cannot be forced.
 - The pieces would lay on the table for weeks as we gradually placed another piece in its place
 - The Star Trek puzzle went together and we eventually glued it to a piece of plywood to keep it
 - The dragon puzzle, well it was missing one piece.
 - After searching high and low thinking we may have dropped it somewhere, we eventually gave up and moved on.
 - As I considered today God’s work in the world and in particular with our readings, and over the millennia
 - God trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle seems like it a good one, if a non-traditional one
 - God is dedicated and persistent in assembling this puzzle, or God’s kingdom, or God’s hope and dream for all God has created

¹ <http://image2.onlineauction.com/auctions//15879/cfma-1126417-1.jpg>

² <http://www.amazon.com/Ravensburger-78000-Fire-Dragon/dp/B00005S0JJ>

- And yet, God does not force pieces into place, but waits to find the right piece at the right time.
- Although the goal is there, the order in which the pieces will be placed is a mystery- with the hope that all the pieces will be found.
- Yet God is not giving up, even when the pieces are hard to find.
- This commitment began with creation, continued through Noah and the flood, and finds its way into our Old Testament reading today with Abram
- Our reading is a bit different than we are used to; this oath that God makes is symbolized oddly
 - It seems that Abram split some animals and some how laid them out such that one could pass through the middle
 - We do not have much of a reference point for this ritual, but it is one of an oath
 - God was making an oath to Abram to fulfill God's promises of children and of land
 - Abram had some legitimate doubts here: How can Abram's descendants be vast as the stars in the sky when he has no children?
 - God then reassures Abram that it will happen, and Abram believes God, and all seems well
 - Abram believes and it is counted as righteousness- Abram's faith has made right his relationship to God
 - And God still goes a step further
 - God takes an oath, which is signified in the passing between the two pieces of sacrificial animal
 - The deal is "cut"; when someone makes this gesture, it would imply that if they break the oath, they would become like these animals³
 - God is making an unbreakable oath to Abram, and by doing so, God is limiting God's self to working within this promise ⁴
 - It's important to note that Abram is not a part of this ritual- Abram is asleep and God is performing the actions
 - Abram has already done his part- he has already expressed his faith and believed in God's promises

³ <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/clnt2m.shtml>

⁴ Preaching the RCL, Year C, Lent/Easter, p. 32

- But it's God's dependability which is in question, and God is making sure there is no doubt ⁵
- By performing this ritual, God is binding himself to these promises
- And God keeps promises, for God is bound by oath to do so
 - For Abram, he did have children, and their descendants are many
 - But it did not happen instantly- these promises of children and land took 400 years to fulfill ⁶
 - But God, once again, did not stop there
 - God continued to call Israel back into covenant, back into the faith that Abram had
 - Through the centuries, Israel would turn to God and then away, and God would welcome them back
 - God continued to wait for the right piece to fit at the right time- never forced and forever committed.
- Even in our Gospel, God is calling out to Israel, and in this case, it is Jesus who laments over Jerusalem.
 - In today's Gospel, we have an unusual turn of events
 - Today, the Pharisees are actually helping Jesus, it seems- they are warning him that Herod is out to kill him ⁷
 - Coincidentally, this is the second Herod to try and kill Jesus- the first Herod began killing newborn babies around the time Jesus was born ⁸
 - That if Jesus knows what's good for him, he would turn and go the other way
 - Jesus, however, sees it differently- Jesus is operating on God's time table and is sure that Herod poses no threat
 - Jesus responds that he still has work to do, and that work includes going to Jerusalem
 - It is in Jerusalem that the real danger exists.⁹
 - Even though Jerusalem represents the ultimate price that God must pay, Jesus goes

⁵ Preaching the RCL, Year C, Lent/Easter, p. 32

⁶ W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=2/28/2010

⁷ <http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/Clent2nt1.html>

⁸ Preaching the RCL, Year C, Lent/Easter, p. 36

⁹ <http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/Clent2nt1.html>

- Why? Because of God's commitment that was started back at the beginning-
- Because Herod and the rest of Jerusalem are among those Jesus wants to save
- Because the cross is just another oath God is making.
- God's commitment to see this through and to bring about the kingdom
- Jesus says to Jerusalem, "how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."
- But they refused God's outreach hand- God must find another way to bring about the kingdom
- Yet God's commitment remains steadfast
- You and I are beneficiaries of this same covenant today, through the life of Christ
 - It's not the promise of land and descendants, but the promise of comfort and guidance.
 - That when two or three gathered, God is in the midst of them
 - We are promised forgiveness when we repent
 - And that God's grace is sufficient during our times of struggle.
 - Forgiveness comes quick, but grace and strength, and wisdom to see the events in our lives as building blocks...
 - This may not come instantly- it may only be upon reflection in our lives that we are able to see God's grace and influence
 - Like Abram, it was 400 years before the promises were fulfilled ¹⁰
 - But ultimately, our promise is that our lives matter to God- the things we do and say matter
 - We do not end in the grave, but continue with God after death, and the impact of our lives upon those around us certainly continue long after we're gone
 - We each have the choice whether to be a piece to the puzzle, or to hold out
 - Because I believe that God works with and through us and our gift of free will- through our words, hands and actions
 - That this kingdom that Jesus told us about and extended to all of humankind begins with us as willing participants.
 - We, like Abram, are called into covenant with God and it requires faith- faith is counted as righteousness

¹⁰ W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=2/28/2010

- God is swearing an oath to us through Christ-
- The cross that Jesus goes to is just another illustration like with Abram, of God's steadfastness
- So here we are: included into God's covenant, but still waiting
 - God's calling out to us and this hurting world as God did to Jerusalem, like a hen who cares for her children
 - God longing and waiting for us, for this world
 - I wonder if humanity will ever tire of hate, blame, of greed and violence
 - I was walking over here this morning while it was still dark out
 - The street lights were on, the bell tower was still lit.
 - If you haven't been by at night in the last few days, I have turned the bell tower blue and yellow in support of Ukraine, and of Peace
 - A silent blue and yellow prayer vigil
 - The events in Ukraine are deeply troubling on many levels: the suffering and death Ukrainians are experiencing
 - The long term consequences on the world's political and economic stage
 - In another way, I think there might be a little relief for Americans- and this requires an honest look in the mirror-
 - A relief to Americans to have an enemy again that is not us.
 - I wonder when humanity will no longer need an enemy.
- In some ways I believe God still suffers as on that cross, as God yearns for humanity to out grow the need for things like crosses.
 - And war, land war, cultural war, economic war
 - And how much perseverance God demonstrates in this Good News we believe and proclaim
 - In these very short 40 days of Lent as we wait for resurrection, we get a tiny taste of God's long-suffering and perseverance.
 - This metaphor of God found in the Gospel, a hen caring for her young, really shows this
 - It challenges some of the traditional theology around God, that God is immovable, distant, unaffected
 - But a hen caring for her little ones is not that image of God at all- this is a God that is relational, and by definition, responsive.
 - This is a God that suffers when we do- a God that longs for us even when we turn away.
 - Sure, there is a part of God that does not change- God's essence remains the same: God is always God, eternal

- But at the place where God connects to creation, that is relational, loving, and mothering
- And this good news that God's kingdom is breaking through, but it is not completely here yet.
- The promise is that it will be here some day, that all things will be made well, that all the pieces will be placed in the puzzle
 - And it will be beautiful and worth it
- We may frustrate or slow down God's plans, but God's promise is that God will not give up on it
- Things in this world are not as God desires them
- But God is not quitting- God has made a sacred oath to continue.
- Even if, like Abram, it may be long after we are passed on before
- How can we discern and follow God's call to be a piece to this great divine puzzle?
- It is through a life of prayer, discernment, faith and action that we place our puzzle on the board
- Today we pray for Peace, because we worship the Prince of Peace
- We pray for the victims of this war, and of all of the wars, and for healing
- And we walk in faith that God can take all of this- all of the past couple of years and thousands of year
- And incorporate it into this great puzzle, this beautiful divine goal of creation that is God's Kingdom.

Amen.