
Covenant: Meditating on Images of Trust

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Second Sunday in Lent – Year C

Have you ever made a pinkie promise, that most sacred of playground covenants? Or solemnized a contract by crossing your heart, lest you die? Or sealed a deal with a “spit shake”?

We, humans, need trust. It is the foundation that grounds every human endeavor. It is the building block that constructs civilization. Without trust, we cannot thrive or even survive. Ask a teacher if students can study when they cannot trust where their next meal will come from! We live in an unpredictable world filled with people of varying reliability. Every day, we risk danger and disappointment. And so, we cling to images of trust and rituals of fidelity. We seek some secure handhold for our hope to hang on.

This might be why we adorn positions of power with grandeur, such as the presidential seal affixed to a podium, flanked by flags, a visual promise of stability and leadership. Or why our currency bears the motto, “In God We Trust,” a noble phrase that betrays how our credit-based economy trades on the fragile foundation of trust itself.

Sometimes we turn away from the worries of the world towards our favorite fantasies: superheroes who swoop in to save the day and wizards who wield power beyond our reach. Other times, we take our hope from history, in the great women and men who have shaped the world before us, hoping their wisdom and courage might guide us forward.

We might even turn towards the Church! One lasting symbol of trust is worn on your left ring finger; wedding rings are an image of trust shared between spouses, a quiet yet enduring promise made material in precious metals. They remind us daily that marriage is not a contract but a covenant, a commitment to faithfulness, patience, and shared life.

Strangely enough, this morning’s reading from Genesis: the rather gruesome bloodletting, the esoteric ritual of sacrifice, the dreamlike image of smoke and flame; it too is an image of trust!

Perhaps not to our modern eyes... But to our most ancient ancestors of faith, Abraham and his family, this display of flesh and fire was most certainly a sign and seal of God’s blessing, favor, and presence.

Abraham was in desperate need of such a sign. He had left behind everything familiar - his homeland, his kindred, his security - following only the voice of an unseen God. Years had passed, and the promise that he would be the father of many nations remained unfulfilled. He had no children, no legacy, no evidence that his trust had not been in vain. He was a wanderer in a foreign land, his future uncertain.

Amidst the viscera, through the dramatic flicker of flame, God declares to Abraham: Be not afraid; I am with you as your shield. You have a future. Your story is not over. My creativity will always outfox the decaying forces of death, bringing new life where none seemed possible. Your salvation is not a distant promise but a present reality, here and now. And more than that, you will not only receive blessing but become a blessing, a conduit of divine faithfulness to the generations that follow. This is the covenant I make with you.

The story of Scripture reminds us that we worship a covenantal God! With Noah, Abraham, Moses, and with each of us through Christ, God binds Himself to His creation in steadfast love, offering protection, guidance, and an enduring future. With Noah, this promise is sealed with an olive branch and a rainbow. With Abraham, God assures a future as countless as the stars, ratifying it with flesh and fire. With Moses, God gives tablets

and transfiguring light. And in Jesus Christ, the covenant reaches its fulfillment: proclaimed through a wooden cross, enacted in an empty tomb, and remembered in bread and wine, body and blood. Scripture reveals that God's covenant is one of relationship, and that this relationship brings with it responsibilities: to be trustworthy partners, to maintain open and honest communication, and to share one's blessedness with both neighbor and stranger.

To be clear, covenants are not contracts! Contracts are conditional, entered into for a particular outcome, and become powerless when one side violates the other's trust. In Scripture, covenants are not just mutual agreements between equals; they are divine promises initiated and upheld by God alone. When God makes a covenant, God does so knowing that humanity will falter, that trust will be broken, that people will turn away. And yet, God remains faithful. The burden of faithfulness is borne by God, not us. This is why even when the world rejects Christ, when the people turn away, when trust is shattered, Jesus still journeys towards Jerusalem. There is no retribution, no reckoning. Jesus instead stretches out His arms like a mother hen covering her young. The cross does not undo the covenant; it fulfills it. We can rejoice that human frailty cannot erase divine faithfulness!

And in times of anxiety and uncertainty, we can rejoice that God has given us images of hope that actively engender our trust: rainbows and starlight, water and wine, service and sacrifice. These are not just distant symbols but nourishment for the journey. Our tradition invites us to meditate on these images, to feast on them, to let them shape our imaginations and mature us in the life of faith.

There's a medieval saying: 'Winter eats what summer grows.' What we store up in seasons of abundance sustains us in seasons of scarcity. I have a friend who has entered the final winter of his life. He would say he is dying. His name is Len, and he's given me his permission to mention him this morning.

There is very little between him and the Kingdom of God, both temporally and spiritually. If the thinning skin and sinking eyes didn't give it away, his joyful spirit would never betray that he is nearing death. Len is a man who has harvested heaps of hope over his life, a life spent largely in lay ministry. He will proudly tell you that he was among the first commissioned chalice bearers in 1976, and he patterns his spiritual life around the Eucharist. His image of hope is the Body and Blood of Christ, a sure sign of God's love and presence. Len trusts deeply in the covenant made in Christ, that promise of eternal life in the Kingdom, and lives as if he's already there. When his prognosis soured and the cancer proved terminal, he was asked what his goals were for the coming weeks. He said, "I want to be the easiest patient here," nothing more than to be a blessing.

Len is my image of trust right now. When I visit him, I witness Christ. I see Christ in his gleaming smile. I see Christ in his breaking body. I hear Christ in his hopeful laughter. And I witness Christ in the community that surrounds him, in Karl and Richard, in Jeannie and Julia, in David and Dan, in Jeff and Barbara, in the many angels that have visited him and sung with him and sat with him.

I wonder, what is your image of trust? I wonder where you witness Christ in the world? The face of a loved one? The steady rhythm of waves upon the shore? Or maybe the creative power of an improvisation on the organ! Perhaps you find the covenant in the quiet confidence of bread broken and wine poured, or in the energetic joy of a baby splashing in the baptismal font. God sanctifies whatever your image of trust is, be it beauty in the sanctuary or acts of service in the streets or something holy and hopeful known only to you. And in that trust, in that covenant, the promise holds. The love of God endures, steadfast and unshaken, from generation to generation. Amen!