

LENT 5B - March 18, 2018
The Un-Cancelled Covenant
(Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33)

They call it “March Madness”: the NC “double A” college basketball tournament; that is. And *already* there’s been a bit of madness, hasn’t there? Because on Friday evening a 16th seed UMBC (or the University of Maryland, Baltimore County – such an obscure school that I actually had to look up what its initials stood for!) went ahead and made history by upsetting a #1 seed, Virginia, 74-54; the first time *ever* that this has happened!

Well, now that “March Madness” is underway, I have been reminiscing in recent days about some of my *own* basketball experiences. Looking back, my freshman year in high school was probably the “height” of what was, admittedly, a rather brief and undistinguished career – literally as well as figuratively. For it was during my freshman season that, for the first and also the very *last* time, I was actually able to “dunk” a basketball; that is; to jump high enough so that my hands (and therefore the ball as well) were completely over the rim and I could just drop or “dunk” the ball into the basket.

It was also during that freshman season that I made probably the best defensive play of my entire short-lived career. We were playing Long Branch who had a very good basketball program in those days. It was late in the game and, when one of my teammates tried to pass me the ball at the top of the key, a Long Branch player intercepted it instead and immediately took off down the court for what certainly seemed like an uncontested lay-up. But, embarrassed over the turnover, I decided to give chase and, swooping in behind him, when he went up for his shot – I blocked it; batting it harmlessly away.

The gym literally erupted in both cheers... *and* jeers. Our fans, of course, cheered my outstanding defensive play. But the Long Branch side *jeered* their own player who had embarrassed both himself *and* them (apparently) by letting me (to use a little basketball lingo here) “reject” his shot – and most emphatically, I might add. Adding insult to injury for them, I’m sure, was the fact that I was just a skinny white kid, to boot.

Well, the bad news was that while I was in the air, fully stretched out in the act of blocking that shot, my opponent – out of anger and frustration, I’m sure – gave me a shove, and I went flying; coming down hard on my right wrist. To make a long story short, I ended up breaking that wrist which required a cast as well as a couple of trips to the doctor. And *that’s* how my Mom and I came to be driving home one day from the doctor’s office in Asbury Park, thus setting the stage for what took place next...

You see, just as we were arriving back into town on Route 33 – now “business” 33 – and were coming up to the Foodtown supermarket (which is no longer there, of course) where we did some of our grocery shopping back in the day, my Mom suddenly decided that she needed a couple of things from the store, so she quickly flipped on her right turn signal and *decelerated* as she turned into the parking lot. Unfortunately, however, the tractor trailer in behind was hugging us a *little* too closely and was unable, therefore, to react quickly enough when my Mom slowed down to make her turn. So, just as we were turning, we felt a little jerk as the truck in behind us tapped our rear bumper.

Now, in those days (for whatever reason), my Mom used to occasionally have a wig out in public when she didn’t have time to “properly” fix her hair, I’m guessing. (Don’t tell her I said that!) And so when that truck tapped our bumper, we were jostled momentarily, causing our necks to snap back. Fortunately, it wasn’t too severe and neither of us suffered significant whiplash or

anything. But, here's the thing, it *was* enough that my Mom's wig completely flew off her head and landed in the back seat!

Pulling into the nearest parking space at the grocery store, my Mom tried to gather herself and checked to see if I was okay as well. We were too surprised and shaken to observe what had happened to the tractor trailer, but suddenly there was a tapping at the window. My Mom rolled it down and there was the truck driver; his face as white as a ghost. "Are you alright?" he asked anxiously. My Mom quickly assured him that we were. "Because when I hit you," he said, "and when I saw that hair flying into the back seat, my first thought was that I had... *decapitated* you!"

Now, as it turned out, this proved to be a rather bad month for my Mom and Dad on the road. You see, several weeks earlier, my Dad had been commuting to work on the NJ Turnpike when a piece of lumber came flying out of the truck in front of him. It bounced once and then struck a glancing blow on the hood of my Dad's car before flipping up and over the entire car as my Dad continued down the highway. There was sufficient damage to the car, however, that it prompted him to file a claim with our insurance company. (He was very lucky, of course, that it only hit the *hood* of the car and didn't come crashing through the windshield.)

Then, a week or so later, we had a little fender-bender here at church. In retrospect, my folks probably shouldn't have filed a claim *that* time, but it was a fellow church member here at Hope and so they automatically exchanged their insurance information with him. Then, of course, my Mom and I were hit by that tractor trailer while turning into the grocery store.

Three claims in one month's time... Apparently it didn't matter that two of the three were not their fault, and that the third was a just a minor fender-bender in the church parking lot. Because the

very *next* month, my folks received notice from their insurance company that they were being dropped.

Now I always thought that that's why we *paid* for insurance; to take care of us when we needed it. But, obviously, there had to have been some "small print" in the contract that entitled the insurance company to terminate the policy if there were too many claims or if the drivers were now considered a high risk...

Well, just for the sake of argument, what if *God* worked that way as well?

The noted Christian pastor and writer, Max Lucado, once gave some thought to that very question himself. He and his wife are, admittedly, a "bit heavy-footed" on the gas pedal "and careless," he notes. So, one day, after a series of tickets and minor accidents, they received a letter from *their* insurance company, detailing their various indiscretions, which concluded, "In view of the above information, we are not willing to reinstate your automobile insurance policy... For your protection, you are urged to obtain other insurance to prevent any lapse in coverage."

"Wait a minute," writes Lucado, "Let me see if I get this right. I *bought* insurance to cover my mistakes. But then I get dropped for *making* mistakes (?) Hello... Did I miss something? Did I fail to see a footnote? Did I skip some fine print in the contract? Did I overlook a paragraph that read, 'We, the aforementioned company, will consider one Max Lucado insurable until he shows himself to be one who (actually) *needs* insurance, at which time his coverage ceases'?"

"Isn't that like a doctor treating healthy patients only?" he asks. "Or a dentist hanging a sign in the window, 'No cavities, please'? ...Isn't that like qualifying for a loan by proving you don't need one? What if the fire department said it would protect you *until*

you had a fire? ...Or a lifeguard said she'd watch over you unless you started to drown?

“Or *what if*, perish the thought, *heaven* had limitations to *its* coverage? What if (he says) you got a letter from the Pearly Gates Underwriting Division that read:

Dear Mrs. Smith,

I am writing in response to this morning's request for forgiveness. I'm sorry to inform you (however) that you have (now) reached your quota of sins. Our records show that, since employing our services, you have erred seven times in the area of greed, and your prayer life is substandard when compared to others of (your) age and circumstance.

Further review reveals that your understanding of doctrine is in the lower 20th percentile and you have excessive tendencies to gossip. Because of your sins, you are a high-risk candidate for heaven. You understand that grace has its limits. Jesus sends his regrets and kindest regards and hopes that you will find some other form of coverage...

What *if* heaven worked that way? What if *God* worked that way?

Our first reading this morning from Jeremiah refers to the “covenant” or agreement that God had with his people. Unfortunately, it was a covenant that they *broke*, says God, even though I was their husband, he says.

Now scholars tell us that this passage belongs to a section of Jeremiah sometimes called the “Book of Consolation.” It was a word of hope and comfort for the people of Judah and Jerusalem who had been defeated and carried off into exile by the Babylonians, and it offered a vision of restoration and a *renewed* covenant between them and God.

You see, it's technically not a "new" covenant, of course, because there had already been a previous one in force. But now, and *despite* their sin and unfaithfulness – sin and unfaithfulness which, by the way, had directly led to their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and their subsequent exile – God was nevertheless willing to start over; to *reestablish* a relationship with them.

"The days are surely coming," says God, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt." Instead, says God, "I will put my law ("teaching" is another way of translating the word here) I will put my teaching within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

And, finally, there comes the most hope-filled promise of all: "for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." I will *forgive* their iniquity and remember their sin *no more*.

Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, was reminded one day of a vicious deed that someone had done to her years before. But, surprisingly, she now acted as if she had never even heard of the incident. "Don't you remember it?" her friend asked. "No," came Barton's reply. "I distinctly remember forgetting it." That's exactly what God promises to do, says our lesson; God chooses to *forget* our sin and iniquity.

Very often when we find ourselves in violation of the terms of an agreement or contract (like my parents years ago, and the Lucado's; both with their car insurance carriers), that contract is nullified; it is, in effect, torn up and is no longer binding.

God, of course, has every reason to do the same thing; to regretfully inform us that, because we have become such a high risk, he has now chosen to also make *his* covenant with us legally null and void. And if God were to actually *do* that... we would have absolutely no grounds for appeal, would we? Because it's pretty clear that we have utterly failed to live up to our part of the relationship. We have failed, time and time again, to live authentically as God's people and to follow God's ways.

But that's *not* what God has chosen to do, however. Yes, we have completely violated the terms of our covenant with God – *all of it*, not just the fine print. But even as God tears up that old covenant – making it null and void – he immediately goes about writing a *new one* on our hearts. In other words, in spite of every valid reason to the contrary, God instead chooses to *renew* his covenant with us. That is, even though we have broken our relationship with him, God has chosen to keep that relationship intact and “in force.” The good news is that we have a God who honors his commitment to *us*, even and *especially* when we fail to honor our commitment to *him*.

But how can that happen? Going back to the analogy of a car insurance company for a moment, if that company honored every policy – even and especially those high risk drivers – such a company would probably not remain in business for very long, would they? Even more than that, they would be compromising their own integrity by not insisting that their policy holders be held accountable for their actions.

The same, presumably, is true for God as well. So how, then, is it possible for God to forgive? How is it possible for God to *be* merciful, and not simply condone or overlook sin? How is it possible for God to forget; in other words, to “remember our sin no more”?

In response, Max Lucado offers this: “Imagine,” he writes, “(the insurance executive) inviting me to his office and saying these words:

Mr. Lucado, I have found a way to deal with your mistakes. I can't overlook them; to do so would be unjust. I can't pretend you didn't commit them; to do so would be a lie. But here is what I can do. In our records, we have found a person with a spotless past. He has never broken a law. Not one violation, not one trespass, not even a parking ticket. He has volunteered to trade (driving) records with you. We will take your name and put it on his record. We will take his name and put it on yours. We will punish him for what you did. You, who did wrong, will be made right. He, who did right, will be made wrong.

Now, “If you’re waiting for an insurance executive to say that,” writes Lucado, “don’t hold your breath. He won’t... He can’t... Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t. (No one) has (a) perfect record.”

But that’s *exactly* what God in Christ has done for us! As St. Paul wrote in Romans 8:3, “For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he *condemned* sin...” And in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who *knew* no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” And finally in Colossians 2:13-14, “when you were dead in trespasses... God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us... *erasing the record* that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.”

Martin Luther called this the “wonderful exchange.” “Christ has taken our place,” wrote Luther. In others words, he has taken upon *himself* all of *our* debt and guilt before God. Christ has both fulfilled the law; that is, the terms of the covenant, the relationship

with God that we have violated time and time again. And Christ has also suffered the punishment, the consequence of those repeated violations.

And all this is given to sinners freely, said Luther. It costs us *nothing* (he says), but “it has cost someone *else* very much...”

In today’s gospel, in fact, we heard how Jesus’ soul was troubled because he knew that he was facing death. But he also understood that his death would be the judgment of the world; the way in which the ruler of this world would be driven out. “And I,” said Jesus, “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this, notes John, “to indicate the *kind* of death he was to die.”

Or, as our second reading from Hebrews this morning expressed it, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...”

Years ago, when my parents lost their car insurance, they went into what was called the “high risk” pool where another insurance carrier had to take them on, but then could also charge them a much higher rate for the very same coverage. Max Lucado writes that he, too, found a new automobile insurance company, but one that was allowed to charge *him* a little more as well.

But “my eternal soul is under *heavenly* coverage,” writes Lucado, “and Jesus isn’t known for dismissing clients. He *is* known, however, for paying premiums, and I’m *paid up* for life. I’m in ‘good hands’ with him...”

This morning is “first communion” here at Hope. Young people in our congregation have spent the past several weeks learning about the holy meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night in

which he was betrayed, and which he then commanded them to *continue* to share with each other; something we do to this very day.

They learned how this holy meal is connected to the Exodus event and the Passover. And they learned how it is *also* connected to the “covenant” that God makes with each one of us in baptism; a covenant that exists because of *God’s* faithfulness, not ours. And a covenant that promises that God in Christ has truly forgiven our sins – past, present, and future – and will, therefore, remember those sins... *no more*.

Amen.