

Third Sunday of Lent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
4 March 2018

One of my favorite shows on American Television is “Let’s Make a Deal”. This popular show has been a staple of world-wide television channels since 1963. “The format of Let's Make a Deal involves selected members of the studio audience, referred to as "traders," making deals with the host. In most cases, a trader will be offered something of value and given a choice of whether to keep it or exchange it for a different item. The program's defining game mechanism is that the other item is hidden from the trader until that choice is made. The trader thus does not know if he or she is getting something of greater value or a prize that is referred to as a "Zonk," an item purposely chosen to be of little or no value to the trader.” (Wikipedia). I think of this popular show every time I read the passage from Exodus we have read today.

One of the defining characteristics of our God is that our God delights in making covenants with his people. A Covenant is a deal between two parties where each side is responsible for a set of actions. These were common as peace treaties between enemy tribes after a long war, as deals between a stronger and a weaker king before a war took place, a deal between two business partners, etc. Throughout this season of Lent we have seen several of these Covenants between God and his people. On the first Sunday we read from Genesis 9: 8-7. After the great flood, Noah and his family enter into a covenant with God. God says, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature... that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God promises life and protection from floods, and Noah promises to fill the earth, rule over all creation, and establish a sacrificial system to worship God. The sign of this Covenant was the a rainbow. Every time the Israelites saw the rainbow they were to remember their deal with God.

Last week, on the Second Sunday of Lent, we read from Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 where God enters into a Covenant with Abraham. God offers him numerous descendants, “You will be the father of many nations”; promised land, “To your descendants I will give this Land”; a special relationship with God, “You shall be my people and I will be your God”; a royal line, “Kings shall come out of you”; and great prosperity. All that Abraham and his people need to do is to “walk before the Lord in righteousness”. In other words, they must accept in faith the promises God has made to them and they shall agree to be God’s people. What this means is that they must agree to love and worship God and God alone. Many see here the beginning of Monotheism or the worshipping of only one God. The sign of this Covenant is Isaac, a child given to the elderly couple, even though Sarah had been barren for many years.

Today we read from Exodus 20: 1-17 and we are all familiar with this Covenant between God and Moses. God promises the people to fulfill all the promises made to the ancestors: Land, numerous descendants, kings, protection, and prosperity. In other words, Israel will be God’s possession, it will be a kingdom of royal priests, it will be a holy nation,

it will enjoy God's protection, and it will have a special relationship with a gracious and forgiving God. (John Piper). The people, on the other hand, promise to obey the 10 commandments. They must promise to have no other gods but God, never to create or worship any idols, to love and respect the name of God, to obey the sabbath day, to honor their parents, and to abstain from murder, adultery, stealing, giving false witness, and coveting a neighbor's goods or family. The sign of this covenant is the famous Ark of the Covenant, which contains the tablets of the Law, Aaron's staff or cane, and a jar with Manna to remind the people of the food God provided for them in the desert.

Unfortunately, we all know how unable the people were to fulfill their side of the Covenant. Almost from the get go, Israel traded that special relationship with God for idols, made by human hands. They disobeyed the commandments, and proved completely unable to love their God with absolute and complete devotion. Overtime their religion became a matter of obeying a long list of chores, rather than a sacred relationship with God. It soon stopped being a matter of the heart. Unable to love God with all their heart, soul and mind, they settled for empty ritualism, while neglecting the needs of the poor, the disenfranchised, the widow and the orphans. The faith became more concerned about creating walls of separation between the righteous and the unrighteous than on worshiping God and loving others. They forgot that the Lord prefers mercy over sacrifices. In the words of the prophets, their hearts were turned to stone.

In two weeks we will read a glorious promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people... they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Because the nation's hearts had turned to stone, God himself will give them a heart of flesh and will inscribe his law in these hearts. They will all know God and God will forgive all their iniquity and sin. This glorious promise will lead us to Holy Week and the passion of our Lord. We who are Christians know that this New Covenant indeed took place through Jesus of Nazareth. Every time we gather here to celebrate and worship God in his Son, Jesus Christ, we remember this covenant in his blood. The Holy Sacraments point us directly to the cross of Christ, which is the symbol of this new covenant between God and humanity. God has forgiven our sins and he has elevated us to the status of sons and daughters. This is our new identity. We are sons and daughter of the King.

But, my friends, one of the characteristic that make Let's Make a Deal so much fun to watch is that from time to time the players trade something of great worth for whatever is hiding behind the curtain. Often you find a "Zonk" behind the curtain, something with absolutely no value whatsoever. Now, you can understand the players mistake because they have no idea what's behind the curtain and there is always a chance they will trade for something great and amazing. In our case, however, we know how valuable the gifts God has given us are and we know that they are ours even now. We have been loved and forgiven. We have been given salvation and a new identity as children of God. There is nothing behind that curtain that is worth what we have already been given. But, many of us do trade God's gifts for worthless things, for relationships that oppress us and diminish us,

and for lifestyles that subjugate our neighbors and make us more isolated from God and others. Many of us willingly give up freedom, love, and forgiveness for dependance, hopelessness, and slavery.

My friends, the good news is that God works very differently than our television show we have been talking about. God allows us to realize we have a “Zonk” and allows us to trade that “Zonk” for all the blessings he gives us through the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. So, if you find yourself today holding a “Zonk”, if your life or faith have become a “Zonk”, if you find yourself lost in your own pain or doubt, I have great news for you. God’s covenant in Christ remains as valid today as it was on the day of crucifixion and the day of resurrection. You can trade your “Zonk” for the life-giving power of the Gospel. You can trade in your pain, your guilt, and your shame for the freedom and acceptance that are only possible in Jesus of Nazareth.

Remember that our God delights in making covenants with his people. Today’s covenant is the most amazing covenant he has ever made. Today he gives us his very own Son, and all we have to do is to receive Him in faith and gratitude. The life of God’s Son in exchange for our faithful acceptance. Now, that is a deal!