

As we head toward the end of our Lenten season, We see God doing familiar things, but in new and disturbing ways. The people of God are familiar with their creator: God who has made deals with them, covenants if you will, and set ground rules for how to live life with God and under God's protection. God has made covenant with Noah, Abraham, the Israelites, and now here, the exiled people of Judah. Repeatedly humanity has reneged on their deal with God, and still, God keeps returning to them.

God is always doing creative, divine acts – acts of forgiveness and redemption that seek to draw us into deeper relationship with God, because God has always and will always desire to commune with us. In our old testament lesson today, we hear as God decides to do something new, different, never before . What bear witness to a God who is responsive, evolving, who notes that things haven't been working, and that something has to change.

Under Abraham, the agreement with God was sealed with the sacrifice of animals. Under Moses, with circumcision. But here today, the terms are new and different: this covenant of gods, this new reality is to be inscribed directly upon the human heart.

*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.*

But what is it to have our bodies marked by God? From a 21st century vantage point, cosmetic surgery, tattoos, and piercings are commonplace, and may seem for some, not such a big deal. Yet, they are designed to be lasting, permanent. We may "choose" to mark our bodies with images, words or symbols that hold great meaning, often to remind us of a time, or place, or even of our God.

Many times throughout history, humans, including those who claim to be Christian, have marked the bodies of others for less honorable reasons: the branding of slaves like cattle, a mark of ownership; the tattooing of the wrists of captive Jewish people with permanent ID numbers by National Socialists in Germany; Christian soldiers in Bosnia branding a cross upon the forehead of Muslim POWs. In our contemporary society, it is gang members whose bodies are marked with tattoos that tell the tale of who one belongs to, the journey one has taken and sometimes, what one has done to earn that belonging. For example: a teardrop tattoo which can signify both the loss of a loved one, or a life one has taken.

At Homeboy Industries, a non-profit founded by the Jesuit Priest, Fr. Greg Boyle, their most popular social service offering to those seeking to be rehabilitated from Gang life is tattoo removal. For many, the first step in leaving gang life is recognizing that

gang-related tattoos are unwelcome in the workplace. These markings set upon their bodies with the intention that they last forever are no longer relevant. In fact, the most mentioned reason their clients want to remove tattoos is the hope of setting a good example for their children, the hope for a fresh start. Tattoo removal is often the first step in surrendering and shedding one's old identity as they are made new.

As painful as it can be to get a tattoo, it is more painful to have them removed. Even with their removal, visible scarring remains. Such markings tell the story of who we are: a biker, or a veteran, a flower child or a prisoner, a member of a fraternity, a clan, or gang. The marks we carry tell the world what matters to us – – what we think is beautiful, or who or what is important in our lives.

so this idea of a new covenant with God is actually one that can be difficult to hold. God's covenant with God's people is sealed by the carving of the law into the human heart, the center of human life. In Hebrew society, the heart was not only the center of emotional life, it was understood to be the center of moral, ethical, and intellectual life – – from which behavior and thought stemmed. There would be no external marking to identify God's people, but rather an internal mark, an inward identity, proven in the turning of one's heart.

In this new covenant, God touches in the very heart of human desire, always desiring to turn the human creature toward its creator, no matter what the person's life circumstances have been.

As much as we say, we love God, and we do, I think we have to admit that we struggle with the notion of submitting to a God who wishes to touch and shape, and reshape our hearts. Being "touched by God" can sound good, or make us feel special. But if we're honest, with ourselves, we know that there is a cost for that touch and often, we're not really interested in paying the cost. we resist turning to God, we resist surrendering ourselves to god's will, because doing so restricts our choices, dictates what our preferences should be, adds a level of responsibility to our lives that are already sufficiently full. Truly, the calling of a life centered on God is not an easy choice when the will of God is not the closest thing to our hearts.

Frequently God gets moved to the sidelines and we get positioned at the center. Priorities get shifted, and sometimes God gets put on hold while we take other calls. In today's world, it's more common than not that someone's phone goes off in the middle of an important meeting, reminding us all of the hard truth that we listen for other people's voices first, and to the voice of God only after we had finished with everyone else.

What does it look like when our hearts have been marked by God?

Jesus shows us in this morning's gospel from John. He is about to be betrayed, handed over to his enemies to be tortured and put to death. And he says two important things: the first is that his soul is troubled, what the Greek word speaks to as deep sorrow or pain. What is to come is indeed troubling, terrible — and he feels it acutely. The second: that in whatever was to happen, God's name would be glorified. "What should I say — father save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour., Glorify your name".

Jesus is resolved. But he doesn't like it. And if we're honest, neither do we. But the invitation before us is like Jesus': to surrender control of our lives back to the giver of life, the covenant maker, who gives us the strength to endure our hardships, to endure our journey, with confidence and hope. Jesus makes clear that the power of sin is never, ever, greater than the power of God within us. But the whole point of our Lenten season of repentance is that we are asked to be willing to let go of something, so that God may dwell within us. We must be willing to relinquish our attachment to that "other" that gets between us and God.

*There was a time around 2009 when I was having some bad dreams. Dreams that would jolt me up and out of bed, feeling like I was suffocating, certain that I was dying, but with every bit of myself resisting that. One day after church, as our priest, Paul was walking by, Peter casually said loud enough for Paul to hear him, have you told Paul about your dreams? Looking at Paul, I said no, and then proceeded to tell him what I experienced. He listened intently, and then looked me in the eyes, and simply said, "have you ever considered that you might need to die to self?" Having no idea what he was talking about, I answered, "no." And with that answer, he turned and walked away, leaving me to ponder it.*

*You see, to experience the glory of God requires us to die in order to live, to shed our cocoons of safety and take flight and lives empowered by God strength. My soul was crying out for life. As God had begun to call me into a new vocation, it was imperative that I be willing to let go and surrender some of my identity — identity to which I was exceedingly attached. But letting go is painful work. Truly, with each surrender it feels like we are experiencing death again and again and again, especially if we lose sight of the God who loves us, who marks covenant on our hearts, and gives us the strength to step forward in faith. Such transformation is never easy, as Christ testifies to, but it is truly possible because of the Christ who endured all human experience with its peaks and its pits to show us how we live.*

When the road had become rough for the Israelites, they turned to God in their suffering. When the road ahead for Jesus became rough and filled with turmoil, Jesus turned to God in his sufferings. Because Jesus was obedient to the will of God, he is now today for us, a source of eternal salvation. Following in his footsteps, we can endure whatever hardships face and like him, we can triumph and change the world.

Psalm 51, where we find words from king David, said to be written by him after Nathan called him out for the abuses of his leadership, and his sin of adultery. With sincere repentance, and a deep desire for redemption, David calls out to God, seeking forgiveness and praying for a fresh start.

We all need fresh starts, and we may begin by intentionally turning our hearts toward the one who loves us, who forgives us, and who gave himself for us.

To close our Lenten season, I invite you to take your bulletin and to open it to the Psalm. After a time of prayerful silence, I invite you to join me in kneeling, as we pray aloud together psalm 51: verses 11-13. As you prepare, take a moment to reflect: What might God be inviting you to let go of today? What might you need to shed: a way of being, a point of view, an unwillingness of heart to God, deep sorrow, or great fear? Whatever it is, I encourage you to surrender it to God, and then calling upon the words of Psalmist, to create a space and place within your heart where the Spirit of God may dwell and flourish.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again, and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit. Amen.