

It is a word used 303 times in the Old and New Testament. We heard it 5 times just in our first reading today – and will hear it another 4 times in the course of the Sunday readings during Lent.

It is a word that one Scripture scholar says is the answer to the question: What is the Bible all about? And is a word which explains why God does and says the things God says and does in the Scriptures.

It is a word that is used in every Eucharistic prayer we pray at Mass – one that remained a constant even through the re-translation of the Missal several years back when we picked up such wonderful words as consubstantial, and abasement, and oblation. . .

And the word is . . . COVENANT! Which is simply how the Bible explains God's relationship with us – and our relationship with God.

If we jump all the way to the first reading on the fifth and final Sunday of Lent – celebrated on March 21st and 22nd ---- where we hear the word covenant used again – the prophet Jeremiah helps us understand this relational word. Jeremiah writes:

“Thus says the Lord: I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be there God, and they shall be my people.”

Between this first Sunday of Lent – and the last Sunday of Lent. Between the first use of the word covenant in Lent, and the last time it is used –

We have time to come to terms with the challenges and blessings of covenant.

For now, simply think of it in this way: *I have loved you with an everlasting love – I have called you and you are mine.*

Or think of covenant in this way;

Back in the 1960s at the Pan American Games, a United States diver was asked how he coped with the stress of international diving competition. He replied that his routine at every dive was to climb the board, take a deep breath, and to think: “even if I totally blow this dive ----- my mother will still love me.” Then he would strive for excellence.

If we would begin each day of our lives – taking a deep breath and then thinking to ourselves: “Even if I totally blow it today --- God is still going to love me. . . then strive for excellence-----it would show we have a good understanding of covenant.

God will never abandon us –even if we abandon God. No matter how far we stray – no matter how far we run – God will always be waiting to welcome us back.

That is a difference between a contract and a covenant. In a contract, which deals mostly with business, work, or the exchange of services or products --- either party can break the contract and walk away from it.

In a covenant, which deals mostly with relationships and the exchange of support and affirmation – even if one party breaks the covenant and tries to move on – the covenant still exists. . . Even if a mother could forget her child – God will never forget us.

And the problem in covenants is never about God – the problem always lies with us: our stubbornness, our independence, our weaknesses, our lack of life-giving choices. . . We build walls against God's goodness, erect barriers to allowing God's grace to flow freely into our hearts and lives, our minds and spirits.

Are we not all too aware of the fact that we can get so caught up in daily concerns, problems, pleasures and everyday life that we give little attention to the Creator and lover of our souls?

As the fourth Eucharistic prayer reminds us so well: “When through disobedience we had lost your friendship [God]: time and again you offered us covenants and through the prophets taught us to look forward to salvation.”

God never abandons us!

So whatever we choose to do over the next few weeks for Lent – or whatever we choose to give up during Lent – will not increase God’s love for us. . .

Our prayer, our fasting, and our almsgiving will not make us more acceptable to God. We do not earn, gain, or lose God’s love by whether or not we “make a good Lent.”

What a good Lent can do for us – is make us more open to God. More open to God’s grace flowing freely into our hearts and lives, our minds and spirits.

That’s why a good Lent should always start by REMEMBERING – REMEMBERING the covenant – REMEMBERING God’s unconditional and unfailing love for us.

The book of Genesis states that a sign God gives us to remind us of the covenant – is that God sets a rainbow in the sky. . . We don’t do anything to *earn or deserve* rainbows – they just appear in the sky for us to enjoy. . . Just as we don’t do anything to *earn or deserve* God’s love for us – but we are supposed to enjoy that love – and be inspired and encouraged by that love to love God in return --- and to love those around us. That’s Covenant!

I have loved you with an everlasting love --- I have called you and you are mine. . .