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Larkspur, California  
March 1, 2015

Genesis 17:1-7; Mark 8:31-38  
“Significant God Initiatives”

A better title for my sermon could be, “Listen up! God is Speaking” or “The Buck Stops Here.” I like the more precise title, “Significant God Initiatives.”

In South Africa, 1838, the Voortrekkers, or pioneers as we call them, Dutch descendants called Afrikaners, left the Cape at the bottom of the country to flee the British who took control of the Cape Colony.

They escaped British rule to search for new land as the pioneers did in the US. They travelled in covered wagon. As with US pioneers who encountered American Indians the Afrikaners encountered strong, established African ethnic communities, mainly the Xhosa and Zulu.

They arrived in the Province of Natal and sent a party of a few men to negotiate a land deal with the Zulu king, Dingane. The Zulus suspected treachery, a cry went out, “Kill the wizards!” and they killed the visitors. In retaliation, the Afrikaners sent party of 470 commandos to revenge the killing. The Zulus got wind of this and sent 20,000 of their fighting men to meet them.

The weaponry made the difference in the battle. The Boers, the Afrikaans name for farmer, another name for the Afrikaners, had rifles and the Zulus had cowhide shields and spears.

Each trekking community appointed two leaders, one political and one religious. They were strict Calvinists. On the way, they made a covenant with God. They said if God gave them victory over the Zulus they would remember the day forever as the Day of the Covenant or Day of the Vow in honor of God.

On the night of December 15, they placed their wagons in a circle called a laager and they camped inside the circle. The site was on a slight rise above the Ncome River. They said their prayers and slept. Mist covered the area overnight. In the morning, the sentries could faintly make out Zulus in the far distance and the group readied themselves inside the laager. They waited for the Zulus to attack.

The mist still covered the land. As the sun rose, the mist evaporated and from 25 yards away, thousands of Zulus blanketed the region. A Zulu cry pierced the air and they charged from various sides and across the river to attack the laager. The Afrikaners blasted away.

Three-thousand Zulus fell to the ground before the Zulus called a retreat. Afrikaners sped after them on horseback and only three of their entire group was injured, just slightly. Bleeding Zulus fell into the river and changed its color and from that day, the event was called the Battle of Blood River.

The Afrikaners rejoiced and gave thanks to God and declared December 16 a national holiday. They built a church in the city of Pietermaritzburg, where Anna and David were born, and called it the Church of the Vow.

During apartheid, the Afrikaners celebrated the day with a church service in the morning and a braaivleis back home. Braaivleis is the Afrikaans word for barbecue. Their Black servants knew to lay low on the day because the more zealous Afrikaners would be so worked up they would lay into them with whips called sjamboks. Sjamboks were used to tie the wagons together into the laager.

I know this story well because it was the subject of my senior paper in Theology at the University of Natal. The paper was entitled, "The Religious Significance of the Day of Covenant in Afrikaner Nationalism."

The battle had a formative and lasting influence and impact on the Nationalist Party that created the insidious system of apartheid. To this day, people still refer to the laager mentality of the Nationalists.

Renowned missiologist, Dr David Bosch, himself an Afrikaner of liberal persuasion said the whole thing went wrong when his ancestors made a covenant with God. In biblical covenant theology, human beings do not make covenants with God; God makes covenants with human beings. That's a "significant God initiative." When human beings dictate the terms, it's a tail wagging the dog scenario. It easily serves political ideology and not a theology of grace. Biblical covenant theology is exactly as stated with Abraham in today's Hebrew Bible reading. The lectionary omitted for some strange reason the last sentence of the covenant, which I shall include.

God said to Abram, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

This covenant has problems that require solid interpretation but the essence is that it comes from God and not from human beings. When God makes a covenant with us and gives us something, like land, it is a sacred trust. We are responsible God agents with everything God gives us. When we dictate the terms, we make human laws based on human values and that can be too self-serving. It is better to make laws according to our understanding of what God gives us.

That's the first significant God initiative of this sermon. I'll spend less time on the second one from the Gospel story since time is moving on.

Jesus teaches his disciples. He says, referring to himself in divine terms, "...the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'"

Here Peter takes a human approach to what eventually comes to be good news, Jesus will suffer, be rejected and killed and he will rise again. This is the Lenten message: death is faced but it is not the end. Any death we experience as Christians, the mini-deaths of this life and the final death at the end of life has its denouement in resurrection, new life in this world and eternal life in the world to come.

Peter doesn't see the profundity of this teaching, which quite a natural response (how would we like to hear about our close friend's suffering, rejection and death). One can only hear such difficult teaching from God as a significant God initiative otherwise, like Peter it becomes denial of death and especially of the divine message of life through death. That's why Jesus reprimands Peter.

The passage goes on with the divine challenge to take up our cross and follow Jesus. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

Can you imagine a person saying this to another person? It can only come from God's divine initiative. The message is not to deny the gifts God has given us and our true self. Rather, it encourages us to be fully committed to God, wholly oriented to God's values in Jesus which means denial of things that take us away from genuine, authentic, compassionate and caring living.

There are other ways of expounding on this text but I will leave it there and point towards Holy Communion, which we celebrate today. We come to the table prepared by Jesus and we partake of his body and life-blood (symbolically speaking), we affirm communion with each other, and go out, carry our cross, and serve God the best we can. Amen.