

I come in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever loved someone so much that you'd take a bullet for them? Would you take that bullet regardless of how they felt about you, or how they behaved towards you? Consider your best friend who suddenly turns against you, or spreads lies about you. Would you still take that bullet? My knee-jerk reaction would be, "No. Maybe at one time, but not anymore - not without reconciliation." My love for them is conditional. That is disturbing to me.

Then there is taking a bullet for a cause, a greater good. Without getting political, we can only imagine the number of Ukrainians and Russians that are taking bullets for what they believe is a greater good. The stakes are high!

Regardless, some endure the chaos, drama, danger, and atrocities, placing their own existence on the line in the name of love. It may be love of a person, a principle, or a virtue. We see, and have seen, how citizens take a bullet in order to defend freedom, liberty, and human dignity. How many public servants, law enforcement, medical teams, and firefighters, willingly risk their lives in the line of duty? For those of us who are parents, would we put our life on the line to protect our children? If faced with an armed assailant, would you sacrifice your child in order to save your own skin? Would you put your life on the line even if your child disowned you?

Today, in our readings, we find two curious accounts about God's desire to gather His beloved under His wing, to shield them, and to put His very existence on the line. Perhaps we can try to get at why God would do something so crazy.

In our reading from Genesis, God assured Abram that He was his shield, and promised Abram that he would be richly rewarded. Our reading mentioned that Abram was Hebrew, from "*habiru*", a name associated with a semi-nomadic people. He had no place to really call home. Even so, Abram was already rich - in livestock, silver, and gold, and had a beautiful wife, Sarai. What could be better?

Every patriarch had a deep desire to have a son, an heir, who would carry on the family name. Without a son, the family name ends, traditions are lost, memories of them would fade away. So, Abram asks God, "What do you propose, I have no heirs?" And God responds with, "I'll give you land that you can call your own. I promise. (In Exodus it is the Promised Land). Abram responds, "Land? I'm an old guy, and did I mention that I have no heirs. Thanks, but. . ."

God says, "Trust me," and **promises** Abram that he will have countless descendants. Abram believed God (mostly, I think), but wanted some assurance that God would deliver?

Abram could have asked for a contract, but God doesn't do contracts. God does covenants. Today, the term 'covenant' is almost interchangeable with

‘agreement’ or ‘contract.’ But in ancient times, covenants had a deeper dimension than a simple agreement. I need to go off on a rabbit trail for a few moments.

Covenants had a structure/framework to them, based upon the suzerain vassal treaty. **Generally speaking**, the sovereign states who he is and what he has provided to the vassals in the past, followed by expectations and consequences. Finally, there was an oath, a solemn promise. The oath would be sealed by a ritual or symbolic act, often including bloodshed.

In a simplified version of this treaty, God, as the sovereign, was the God that brought Abram and others out of Ur of the Chaldeans. He promises Israel will be blessed with land, and countless future generations.

In the final oath and ceremony, animals are cut in two. Normally, both parties walk between the divided animal carcasses, indicating they agree to abide by the promises. If one violates the covenant, their fate will resemble that of the sacrificial animals.

Here is where I come back from the rabbit trail. In this covenant, God alone, in the form of a torch, passes between the animal pieces, leaving Him to be the sole party on the hook. What this means is that if God does not keep His promises, it would result in His demise. I can’t imagine that God would cease to exist, but rather our God of love and relationship would be no better than the gods/idols of

other tribes. His beloved could not trust him, or rely on Him. Abram's God of love and relationship established a covenant, a promise of His faithfulness to us, regardless of how much we love Him, behave, spread lies about Him, ignore Him, or even disown Him. Remember, we are among the countless descendants.

In our Gospel today, Jesus wants to gather his children to himself and to hold them close, but they refuse. The pharisees encourage Jesus to leave either because he is truly in danger (Herod wants to kill him), or as a ploy to neutralize his influence. Either way is risky. But Jesus assures them that regardless of the danger or skepticism, he will continue his ministry among them. He is putting his life on the line for the **greater good** of God's will, regardless of their behavior or attitude towards him.

As we look ahead towards Holy Week, we will hear about a New Covenant. At the Last Supper, Jesus says, "This is my blood of the New and **everlasting** covenant. It will be shed for you and for many **for the forgiveness of sins**." As we know, Jesus ultimately "takes the bullet" for us, so we can have hope in the Resurrection. In faith, we are promised eternal life. In the ceremony of the cross, Jesus sealed the oath with his own blood.

In God's covenant with us, we are assured that our sins are forgiven, that we have been redeemed, and are worthy to approach God. Your part? Believe it.

If you were to walk through the sacrificial animals with God, and **your** only promise was **to believe**, how well would you do? Do you really trust God and Jesus? Jesus took a bullet for you and remains faithful to you. God's promise gives you the assurance that you are loved, forgiven, redeemed, and worthy - even in skepticism, imperfection, and outright sinfulness.

To believe/faith is hard work. To truly believe means living in love, regardless of the behavior, attitudes, or feelings towards us by others. I know I can't count on myself to live in love, but I can count on God's promise of forgiveness and redemption – because He put his life on the line for me, and for you!

May you find Lent to be a time of change and renewal. May you live in God's love, trust Him to be your shield, and have the courage to place your life in His hands. You are loved beyond all comprehension! You can count on it! Amen.