

**Sermon for March 1, 2015 (Lent 2, Year B)**  
**Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, (8-14??),15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Mark 8:31-38

Know what: we are set apart for the work of transforming love

So what: our lives must be different

Now what: we are God's conspiracy to tear down the walls that divide humanity

Title: Those Who Lose Their Life

My friends: What is the defining mark of our covenant relationship with God, and how does this mark shape our way of life?

Throughout this season of Lent, the Church is inviting us to come back and consider again the history of the covenants that were established between God and creation.

Last week, we heard about the covenant after the flood, and about the rainbow as the mark of the covenant.

Next week, we will hear about the giving of the Torah and the 10 Commandments at Sinai.

Today, we hear the story of the covenant which God made with Abram and Sarai.

Remember that a covenant is a binding agreement between two parties that prescribes how each party will act toward the other.

In this ancient story from Genesis, God comes to this family and makes a covenant with them and changes their names.

God comes to them, and their destiny is changed – forever.

What is the sign of the covenant? Circumcision of every male.

Now, if we think about it, this is a very odd mark of distinction. For all practical purposes, circumcision is an invisible sign of the covenant.

Can you think of another invisible mark of covenant with God?

What about baptism? In the waters of baptism and with the oil of chrism, we are marked as Christ's own forever – in a covenant relationship that will never end.

But baptism, too, is an invisible sign. The waters dry up, the oil is absorbed into our skin, and then the sign is gone.

But is that invisible sign enough? Apparently not for most people.

It seems that every group of human beings has been determined to mark themselves as different and distinct in some visible, visual way.

For the Jews, after circumcision came the tzitzit and the tefillin and the mezuzah and the yarmulke.

Just think for a moment of all the different ways in which people mark their bodies in order to define themselves as clearly different than others.

Think of the Amish and how they dress. Think of the burqa of Muslim women, or their headscarves. Think of Buddhist monks in saffron robes.

There just seems to be a fundamental need for human beings to distinguish themselves from one another, to make divisions clear. Sometimes this is laudable and worthy of celebration. Oftentimes, it has much darker implications.

It is said that in the Balkans, during the wars in Bosnia and later in Kosovo, it became commonplace for Serbian soldiers to identify one another by sharing a sign with each other by going like this – holding up 3 fingers.

Why 3 fingers, you ask? Because they were fighting against Muslims who hold strictly to the one-ness of God and who reject vehemently any idea of God as Trinity.

Serbians are Orthodox Christians who worship the Trinity. For them (as for us), ultimate truth is not 1, but 3. I applaud them for their faith, but I'm not sure that this is what the bishops had in mind at the great Council of Nicaea in the fourth century.

Two weeks ago, a video was released showing the ritual slaughter of 21 Egyptian Christians captured and killed in Libya.

Did you know that this video had a specific title targeted for people like us?  
That video bore this title: “A Message Signed With Blood to the Nation of the Cross”

Now let me ask you this: how did the Islamic State know that these men were Christians? These Coptic Christians of Egypt have an ancient custom of marking each newly-baptized baby with a VISIBLE sign to complement the INVISIBLE mark of baptism. Each baptized child is given a black cross-shaped tattoo right here – right on the inside of their wrists.

It’s quite easy then to know who is a Christian and who you set apart for execution, if you are the Islamic State.

These are extreme examples, of course, but it seems that we all want to draw lines of distinction between who is IN and who is OUT. Sometime this is harmless enough.

Like “real” Mainers telling me that because I’m here in the Portland area that I don’t actually live in Maine, but in a special territory called “North Massachusetts”.

Ha, ha. OK, I get it. We are always forming these groups in our minds. The ones who “get” it and the ones who don’t. The ones who qualify and those who don’t make the cut.

More often than not, we begin to define a clear border between “US” and “THEM”.

And this is where the trouble begins.

Dr. David Livingstone Smith of the University of New England has written extensively about the process of dehumanization which allows those like the young people in ISIS to commit a seemingly endless stream of cruel and heinous acts. (For reference, see [Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others](#) by David Livingstone Smith.)

It always begins with drawing lines of distinction between US and THEM.  
That is the first step toward de-humanizing the other, which eventually opens the door for all kinds of hatred and violence.

And this is perhaps why group hatred is such a powerful force among humanity. Because we seem to instinctively draw these lines around our group, no matter where we live on earth or our culture or language - or even our religion.

And sadly, far too often, religion plays the role of accentuating these differences and sanctifying the contempt of the group as divine imperative.

So here is our question today: what does it mean for us to be set apart and marked as the people of Christ – as a distinct community, different from those around us – IF we are to steer clear of the dangerous pitfall of dividing the world between US and THEM?

Now we go back to where we started. What is the mark of our covenant with God? The invisible sign of baptism. And it is invisible for a reason! Let me suggest, my friends, that this invisible mark is itself a sign which teaches us about our calling.

Perhaps what it means in our day to lose our lives, to forget about ourselves, to take up our cross and follow the Lord is to live as bearers of this invisible mark who go about erasing the dividing lines within humanity.

Perhaps what it means to set our minds of diving things rather than human things is to ignore every suggestion which seeks to break humanity apart into those familiar camps of US and THEM.

This is what I believe: we are like God's secret agents planted in this and every place to subvert those dividing walls which allow humans to abuse and kill one another. Not only to subvert them, but to abolish them! To tear them down.

And how do we accomplish this? Through the power of self-sacrificial love.

"Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of this good news, will save it" (Mark 8:35). This sounds a lot like these words in John's Gospel: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

The visible, defining mark of our covenant life with God is the way that we love others. THIS is our distinctive mark.

The great John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople who – by the way – was born and raised in the church in Syria in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, gave us this simple way of understanding how our behavior as followers of the Lord affects those around us:

“When we live according to the moral principles of our faith, those around us may respond in three possible ways.

First, they may be so impressed by the example of our goodness, and so envious of the joy which it brings, that they want to join us and become like us. That is the response which we most earnestly desire.

Second, they may be indifferent to us, because they are so bound up with their own selfish cares and concerns. Although their eyes may perceive our way of life, their hearts are blind, so we are unable to stir them.

Third, they may react against us, feeling threatened by our example and even angry with us. Thus they will cling even more firmly to their material possessions and selfish ambitions, ...

Naturally, we dread this third type of reaction, because we want to live in peace with our neighbors, regardless of their personal beliefs and values.

But if no one [ever] reacts to us in this [third] way, we must wonder whether we are truly fulfilling the commandments of Christ” (On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom by Robert Van De Weyer, p. 12).

My friends, these are dark times and it is precisely for times such as this that we are called and set apart as followers of the Lord.

When the darkness is strongest, that is precisely when we must shine the light of Christ with more fervor, more devotion, more love.

But can the world see that in us? Are we engaged with the Holy Spirit in the work of erasing those dividing lines among humanity? Are WE agents of God’s transformational work? Is the self-sacrificial love of Christ the FIRST thing that comes to mind when others think of Saint Mary’s?

This is no time to live small, to think small, to stay hidden and private and quiet.

We have been called and marked for the most important purpose of all.  
So let’s get to work. Amen.