

March 1, 2015, Second Sunday in Lent (Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38)

We are still learning what it means to be human, even as we learn who God truly is.

by [Paul Nuechterlein](#) in the [February 18, 2015](#) issue

Why do people get married? In our culture, the most common response to this question is, “For love!” In other times and places, it’s had more to do with the socioeconomic relations between two families. A Christian answer might go something like this: we belong to a covenant God who calls us to live in covenant with each other, covenants such as marriage.

When you live in faithful relationship with someone for years that stretch into decades, you share just about everything. In a marriage founded on trust and love, this can range from the most ordinary activities down to your innermost thoughts and feelings. In getting to know my life partner, I learn both about myself and about what it means to be human. This is a never-ending process filled with trial and error. You know how it goes: just when you think you have a loved one figured out, the loved one surprises you again. So you can’t proceed in this journey without love and forgiveness.

That’s why God is a covenant God: to undergird all our human covenants with the love and forgiveness we need. From the beginning, God offered human beings a covenant life as a foundation for our living together in peace. But from the beginning we blew it. We thought we could know these things on our own. The serpent said we could know good and evil if we ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. Paradise was lost.

But instead of giving up on us, God began anew and chose Abraham and Sarah to make a covenant that is the foundation for all others. It is in choosing Abraham and Sarah and their descendants that God seeks to have a conversation over the years, extending not just decades but centuries. Through God’s ongoing conversation with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah—and I believe we should add Abraham and Hagar, to include our Muslim sisters and brothers—God helps us to better know both ourselves and what it means to be human.

In Jesus, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, we are able to see fully and completely both God and ourselves. We learn who God is and what it means to be human. And though it has been centuries, I don't think we yet understand. On God's side of the covenant in Christ Jesus, there is no error, only pure truth of both divinity and humanity. But on our side of the covenant, there is still trial and error—just like in our human covenant relationships. So the conversation continues. We are still learning what it means to be human, even as we learn who God truly is.

Our Gospel reading offers an example. A few verses earlier, Peter has gotten it right by proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. But in this passage Peter also shows himself to be wrong—trial and error. He assumes that as God's servant, the Messiah is here to bring God's wrath down upon God's enemies. But Jesus goes on to say how the wrath of the Romans will come down upon *him* and he will be crucified. For Peter, this surely can't happen if Jesus is truly God's Messiah. Peter thinks he knows who God is, but the conversation-made-flesh-in-history will prove him wrong.

In Jesus the Messiah, we find out that God is not wrath, but love. God takes the wrath of our law upon himself in Jesus on Good Friday and turns it into love and forgiveness on Easter. That's why Good Friday is good—not because of our wrath, but because God's powerful love is strong enough to turn wrath into love and new life.

What about all those passages we interpret to say that God is wrath? We can chalk that up in part to our slowness to understand our centuries-long conversation with God. What we see and hear as God's wrath is actually God's love in pain when witnessing *our* wrath heaped upon each other. Love doesn't mean all is well in the world. Love gives choices—and we so often continue to choose the path of wrath that leads to broken covenants, estrangement, and death.

So where does this leave us? How can the true God of love ever get through to us when we continue projecting our wrath onto our gods? The answer: our covenant God never gives up on us. In infinite patience and love, God continues the centuries-long conversation with us that we might finally hear and understand who God is, and who we are created to be. It took God choosing Abraham and Sarah to start anew. And even with much trial and error among their descendants, the conversation finally became flesh in Jesus Christ, lived out as the suffering servant who calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

Christ's followers have also endured many centuries of trial and error in this conversation, this covenant. Yet again, as always, God starts anew.