

## *Covenant Made*

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“On that day *Yahweh*, God, made a covenant with Abram...” — Genesis 15:18.

It happens all the time. People enter our lives. Then we move on or they move on and in a sense we forget them. But do we?

I was recently reminded twice in one week of someone who was in my life 40 years ago. And I was reminded of this person because of conversations I had with two friends at two different times. Things they said brought this person to mind.

Why did that happen? I don't know. But when, for whatever reason, something like that does happen my sense is I'm supposed to pay attention.

This person's name was Caterina Jarboro. She was an African-American classical singer. She died in 1986 at the age of 90.

I looked up her obituary in the *New York Times* to see if the facts stated there jibed with my memory. [1] Generally they did. But I have more detail from the stories she told me than the *Times* offered, so let me share some recollections.

I met Caterina when I was working with the Actor's Fund of America. She was a volunteer. Some of what she told me refers to often forgotten theater history and some of what she said concerns American history many of us know about. So I hope as I tell you about Caterina to make these references clear. (Slight pause)

Despite being a classically trained singer, an opera singer, Caterina worked on Broadway. She was in the original 1921 Broadway production of *Shuffle Along*. It was the first Broadway show ever written and produced by African-Americans.

Many theater professionals were skeptical a black-written show would appeal to Broadway audiences. But it ran for 504 performances and earned \$9 million, a long run and a large sum for its time.

The book writers were names you've probably never heard, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles. The best known song in *Shuffle Along* was *I'm Just Wild about Harry*. The writers of all the songs in the show were Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. [2]

Of those four writers— Miller, Lyles, Sissle and Blake— Blake gained the most notoriety. Besides *I'm Just Wild about Harry* the songs *In Honeysuckle Time* and *Memories of You* were among his hits. In 1981 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Ronald Reagan.

Back to Caterina— now that I've mentioned her Broadway work I'll move on to opera. She made her United States opera debut in Verdi's *Aida* in a 1933 Summer Opera series at the Hippodrome, a very large New York City Theater. It was the first time a black woman had the lead role in an all-white opera company in America.

Both before and after that appearance she toured for a number of seasons in Europe. Needless to say she returned to the States as WWII started. After returning she had recitals at Town Hall and Carnegie Hall.

Caterina once told me this story: upon her return to America in 1941 she approached an agent to see if she could get a tour started stateside. Of course, the well known African-American classical singer in that era was Marian Anderson.

In 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall for an integrated audience. So Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt arranged for Anderson to perform on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. A crowd of 75,000 gathered for that and there was a radio audience of millions.

Caterina was told by that agent she approached there was room for only one black female classical singer in America and currently that singer was Marion Anderson. So no, there would be no room for Caterina Jarboro or a Caterina Jarboro tour. One black classical singer in America was enough, thank you. (Slight pause.)

Caterina taught me a lot by her attitude, by how she approached her volunteer work at the Actors Fund. She was precise. She was dedicated. She was faithful. And her story, her many stories, spoke volumes to me.

And yes, she was extraordinarily talented. And yes, because of the world in which she lived, the era in which she lived, she was never able receive the acclaim she deserved. That must have been excruciatingly hard to deal with, hard to comprehend.

But she persisted. In a way she was relentless. She never surrendered, never gave up. She always moved forward with a steady, sure hand.

Because the world is what it is she knew there would be roadblocks. But she also knew there was work to be done. And she was someone who could be trusted, someone who could be counted on to do what she could. (Long pause.)

These words are in Genesis: "On that day *Yahweh*, God, made a covenant with Abram..." (Slight pause.)

I want you to notice several things about this reading. Abram gathers a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon. Abram even cuts the larger animals in two.

The darkness, the smoking barrier, the fire pot, the flaming torch we hear about are images fraught with the symbolism of covenant making in the Ancient Near East. Hence, they are not meant as mysterious. That these are symbols of covenant making would have been clear to those who first read these words.

Now, when God says words that give the land (quote:) “to your descendants,” therefore when the covenant, itself, is established, when God enacts the covenant, itself, Abram is (quote:) “in a deep trance.” Therefore Abram does nothing to establish the covenant, enact the covenant or respond to the covenant.

So there is no question about this. The covenant made by God with us is not a two way agreement. It is God Who makes the covenant with us.

The covenant God offers is, like grace, a free gift. God initiates this covenant. God enacts this covenant. God establishes the covenant. To use a phrase I used last week, God is the prime mover. The covenant is not of our doing

Further, what Abram has done is not covenant making. Abram participates. Abram participates by gathering and slaughtering the animals. So what has Abram really done? Abram trusted God.

So you might ask, if Abram has done nothing to initiate the covenant, to enact the covenant, to establish the covenant, where *is* our place in this covenant? What are we to do? I think the key is simple and sometimes hard deal with, hard to comprehend because we firmly believe we are in control of everything.

That having been said, let me ask a key question yet again, where is our place in this covenant? (Slight pause.) We are invited by God to participate— *participate*— in the covenant. And for us mere participation can be hard. It does not feel like enough. We want to do more. Perhaps we even want be in control. (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest there is something for us to do, something we can do. But it has nothing to do with control. It is about relinquishing control. We are to do what Abram did. We are called to trust God. (Slight pause.)

Let’s go back to the story of Caterina Jarboro. She was in *Shuffle Along*, the first Broadway show ever written and produced by African-Americans. She toured for a number of seasons in Europe.

She was the first black woman to have the lead role in an all-white opera company in America. But she was not able to receive the acclaim she deserved since there was room for only one Marian Anderson in America. And yes, that must have been hard to deal with, hard to comprehend.

And what was she doing when I met her? She was volunteering for The Actors Fund. In

volunteering she was raising money to help those in her profession in need.

What was she really doing when I met her? She was persisting. She was being relentless. She had never surrendered, never given up.

She was always moving forward with a sure, steady hand. She knew there was more to life than roadblocks. She trusted that. (Slight pause.)

So, why was I reminded of Caterina twice in one week? Perhaps I was reminded so I could share her story. And perhaps I was reminded so I could note that our real part in the covenant is to trust God. And that, I think, not just our part in covenant. That is the real lesson of covenant: trust God.

Why? The world is what it is. Caterina knew that. The world now is not the way God would have it. Caterina knew that.

And we need to trust God so we can be empowered to do the work of God and the will of God. Doing the work of God and the will of God is the result of trusting God. Amen.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Theologian Walter Brueggemann said this (quote:) ‘Covenant (and, therefore, true spirituality), consists of learning the skills and sensitivities that include both the courage to assert self and the grace to abandon self to another’ (unquote). In short, covenant is not possible unless you recognize the needs of others.’ The needs of others— it’s that love your neighbor thing we keep hearing about. And I would suggest to love your neighbor we actually need to trust God.”

BENEDICTION: Let our hearts take courage. Our God meets us where our needs rest. God is our shelter and shield. God’s blessings outnumber the stars. Let us go on our way with Christ as our companion. And may the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/08/16/obituaries/caterina-jarboro.html>

[2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shuffle\\_Alone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shuffle_Alone)