

Genesis 15:1-21; 17:9-13; 17:19-20;
Jeremiah 31:31-34; I Corinthians 11:23-31;
Exodus 19:1-8; 31:19-20; Jeremiah 32:36-42;
Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:20; Revelation 11:16-19

A COVENANT PEOPLE

There is no such thing as a relationship without a covenant. Certainly there are times when we try to relate – when we try to express our willingness to have a relationship – even before any relationship has formed. It can be that way on a first date. It can be that way with a newborn child. The covenant is only implied on one side. It is a possibility in process. It is the way God begins with all of us. But we all know what happens if no covenant ever forms, if there is never a response to the offer and invitation. Nothing happens. What was a possibility for life and growth and joy turns out to be a dud. When covenants never form or when they are broken, relationship goes down to dust. The possibilities and potential are emptied. All purpose and promise drain away. Unless, of course, the covenant is renewed.

It doesn't matter whether we are thinking of marriage, citizenship, employer/employee, earning a college degree, friendship, or the connection between us and our Creator – there is no such thing as a relationship without covenant. All hope, expectation, and meaning in life are expressed in some form of covenant. If the two of us agree to behave – to act – in some way we have agreed on, then something good or important may come of it. If we both continue to keep the covenant, then appreciation and trust grow. Then we tend to form new dimensions to the covenant. Covenants, like relationships – like life itself – are not static. They flow and grow and change. At any moment in time, they are growing stronger – or they are growing weaker. Nothing is ever what it appears to be on the surface. And nothing stays the same.

The whole history of our world can be told in the light of covenants formed and covenants kept or broken. And some of the saddest stories in our world are about covenants that were formed but after a while it became clear that the parties involved had different ideas about what the covenant really was. They had different expectations – different images in their minds about what the covenant intended or required. So both lived according to their own understanding of the promises and expectations of the covenant. Perhaps they even used the same words, but the pictures in their minds were very different. Unless there is some

kind of awakening – some kind of catching-on to what is wrong – the result in such situations will be the same as if one or both of the parties broke the covenant on purpose.

Satan, of course, hates covenants. If he cannot destroy the covenants, he cannot ruin life. So Satan sows suspicion and he mocks the expectations and agreements. Satan always whispers that the other person is breaking or is about to break the covenant. Satan likes us to be depressed, negative, and counting up all the disappointments – all the ways we are giving more than we get – even though the story is far from over. We have whole organizations and industries in our country that do nothing but tear down, sow suspicion, look for flaws to exploit. We all agree that it is a necessary thing to expose the wrong. But where that becomes the priority and purpose of life, Satan wins. There is no longer any time to build up, to contribute, to be *for* anything, to believe in any possibility. But it is not that hard to tell the difference between godly correction and satanic destruction. Is the purpose to awaken, reveal, forgive, restore, and move on? Or is the purpose to blame, punish, reject, and destroy?

There is no such thing as a relationship without a covenant. And in our world, covenants must constantly be remembered, maintained, reworked, renewed. Of course, that is only true where the relationships are not static – where the relationships are not over; where they are still alive and growing and flowing.

There have been times, in past churches, when it caused consternation as we contemplated taking our annual church covenants – renewing and maintaining our relationships with God – seriously. Some refused. Some were threatened by it. That is very intelligent, by the way. A living relationship with God is always threatening. Wonderful, but threatening. Life with God is always on the move, and any change has a quality – an element – of being threatening. We cannot change and stay the way we are at the same time. So our faith is exciting and threatening – or safe and boring. Take your pick. So we lost some folk who did not want to contemplate any new commitments or any renewal of their covenants. It is ever the way.

But here at this church, we want renewal and the excitement of a more dynamic relationship with God. Renewal and growth seem appropriate to real life in Christ Jesus. God may have more plans for us than we know. Instead of everything locked up and tied down, we want a

church willing and able to respond, to pray, to obey – and to change our commitments and covenants to match where the Spirit is trying to lead us. So we have moved into patterns as old as the Bible itself, and the Bible is about covenants with God from one end to the other. “Testament” means “covenant”! The Old and New Testaments are about covenants between people and God. Abraham made covenant with God: he moved from Ur, and heard and responded to promises he could barely imagine. There is no comprehension of the lives of Jacob or Joseph or Moses – or any of the other biblical characters of faith and flaws that are revealed to us in the pages of the Bible – unless we come to understand the covenants. This is no pointless, purposeless history. What do we think Moses was doing on Mount Sinai? What do we think Elijah was doing on Mount Carmel? What do we think Jesus was doing on the Mount of Transfiguration?

The real question is not whether they were religious. The real question is: Are we? That is, are we also a people of the covenant? Are we in on this story, or is this just for long ago and far away? Some of us say we want in on the story – that we want a relationship with God also. Even if it is scary. Even if it does sometimes take us where we did not know we would go.

So we each write our own covenant each year. It’s either that or have somebody else write it for us. Even if I thought it would be a good idea for me to write your covenant for you or maybe have the Diaconate decide what your relationship with God should be like, you wouldn’t agree ahead of time to keep such a covenant. It’s hard enough to play that way with *God*. And far more to the point, that does not match Jeremiah’s great prophecy, or the incredible New Covenant that Jesus brought to us. So you each get to write your own. And the rest of us agree to accept whatever you write in your covenant each year. That keeps us in a faith family together, yet gives each of us room to respond to the Holy Spirit to the best of our own individual awareness and ability to do so.

If you are a visitor here, it really works this way here. If you write a covenant, you are a full member of this congregation as soon as you send it to me or the Diaconate. You can serve anywhere in our structure – do as little or as much as you feel the Spirit is calling you to do – across the board. It really works that way here. You have only to work it. It all depends on *your* heart and mind – on *your* prayers. We are a covenant people. We are an intentional congregation. At least that is how our

bylaws set it up and describe it. And because life is fluid, you are also able to change your covenant at any time. It is between you and God, even though we try to share the Path and the adventure together.

But there is no structure, concept, or approach that humans cannot mess up if they want to or if they get careless. The entire Bible tells stories of people breaking covenants. Many of them repented, turned back toward God, and tried again, or we would never have heard of any of it. Some of *us* can grow careless too. We might not pray afresh each autumn, getting our hearts and minds ready for covenant time. We can take even the dynamism of a living relationship with God and turn it into a rote, blasé, ho-hum, virtually meaningless affair. I have heard such comments in the past: “Darn, it’s covenant time again. I don’t know what to put in my covenant this year. Whose idea was this, anyway?” If this perspective becomes widespread in a covenant-based church, then, like Israel itself, that church will fall. At least until or unless we repent and renew our covenants.

If you procrastinate with your covenant, it will ruin the system. I know you don’t want your covenant to be meaningless and rote, so you might be tempted to put it off, hoping for more clarity, intending to get back to your prayers. To write a real covenant in November, you have to start praying in September and October. If we are really trying to respond to the Holy Spirit, it takes some time and willingness in God’s presence. If you start in November and then get involved with Christmas, you will be lucky to get anything real turned in by January.

I’m glad you don’t want to just do a cursory covenant on the spur of the moment. I will be even happier knowing you look forward to the time each year when it is appropriate for each of us to invite the Holy Spirit to make some changes in our lives. We cannot put this church together according to human wisdom and still come out a true church. Only the Holy Spirit can mold us and prune us and refine us into the fellowship of followers that the Spirit wants us to be. We do not see the larger picture, but if we each pay attention to our own prayers and our own guidance, the Spirit can shape us into a true and living church. Not perfect – I did not say anything about perfect. Where do you think we are?!

So whose idea was this? Some of you think it was mine. Do I have to remind you that I am not that brilliant? Covenants have always been God’s idea. Of course, there are always skeptics around. Have you

noticed? But skeptics, no matter how much they may try to think so, are not experts on religious matters. Relationship with Christ is never our idea! We do not call God; God calls us. We do not invite God into the covenants; God invites us into the covenants.

When we write our covenants, it is essential (imperative) that we remember this. Our covenants are our attempts to respond to God's invitations. If not, they are nonsense. We try to respond to God's invitations or we are not yet religious in any genuine sense; we are only making things up.

God comes into our world; we do not go into his. We cannot make up the covenants any way we like or want to. That would be mere fantasy – wishful thinking. So of course, some people might not like covenant time. It feels awkward or stupid to them. They aren't having any fun. This is because they still think they are in charge. There is no magic because they will not allow it – they will not open themselves to any of God's real influence. They decide ahead of time that their covenants must not reflect anything very different, challenging, or inconvenient. Their covenants are not allowed to require any real priority changes. So nothing happens. They end up realizing that they were correct to begin with: this covenant thing is awkward and stupid, and annoying besides. On the other hand, they have not truly asked God: "What would You like? What are You asking? Where do You want me to go from here?" On the Christian Path, as most of us have learned to our sorrow, we get penalized for insufficient time in the huddle.

The truth is that many of us want a relationship with God. The longer we live, the more earnestly we want it. In part it is because we want our lives to be about more than personal desires and petty purposes. We move toward life in Christ with trepidation on some levels, to be sure, but we also go in joy. We actually *want* the covenants that go hand in hand with relationship – that define and clarify what the relationship is really about. More and more, our concern turns from our natural fear of not being able to live up to them, to a much deeper and more poignant concern: we want the covenant to match the true meaning of the relationship. Young love wonders how much it will have to do and how much it will have to give up. Mature love longs for opportunities to do more, and prays for the wisdom and strength to do more.

Of course, we do look to Jesus to see if what we are doing and thinking matches His patterns. Increasingly, we realize that if we are

going to make covenants with God, we better get ready to be fearless. Fearless does not mean we feel no fear. It means we do not let fear control our lives, direct our course, make our decisions for us. We no longer allow fear to change our beliefs, our opinions, or our behavior. If we are going to make covenants with God, we better get ready to be fearless. That matches the pattern we have from Jesus.

Underneath the story most people know about Jesus, there is the story of a man who trusted God so deeply and completely that He does appear to us to be entirely fearless. Jesus is nearly incomprehensible in this regard. “Fear not. Do not be anxious.” And He has the unmitigated gall to live that way. The illustrations are almost endless: “*Will you also go away?*” “*Go and tell that fox . . .*” “*Get behind me Satan.*” “*Whoever obeys the will of my Father is my mother, and sister, and brother.*” Jesus walks into disease, anger, perfidy, and experts in religion without showing any qualm. What bothers, disheartens, destroys, or terrifies most people, He does not run from or even shy away from. The rich (like Zacchaeus), the powerful (like Nicodemus), the outcast (like Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman at the well, the blind beggar, the Gerasene demoniac): Jesus is “there” for all of them – calm, focused, caring, unafraid. If you are a rich young ruler with endless resources and you could be incredibly important to the mission, still Jesus will change nothing of His Message to make sure you join. On the other hand, wherever you come from – whatever your past or your persuasion – you get a clear shot at coming with Him. You get to come if you are willing. But you do not get to change Jesus or His course or His truth. That does not change. And where is the most dangerous place on the face of the earth for Jesus during that last Passover? Jerusalem. Where does He go? To Jerusalem.

The man is fearless in a way we have rarely, if ever, seen on earth. Some of His followers caught a good deal of this new kind of LIFE. So it is important, if we are going to be straight and honest about covenants, to not be fooled by our temporary, though very pleasant, surroundings. Jesus invites us into a New Life that we can only experience and come into if we also decide to go fearless with Him. It is the core and heart of our New Life with Him. It is the initiation rite – the WAY into the covenant. We call it baptism, only it is far deeper than the water part. If you want to walk this Path – live this WAY – first you have to drown: Go under. Die first. Get it over with. Put that part behind you. Die to this life. “Then,” He says, “you can come with me. But if you try to put the new wine of my love and WAY into the old skins of fear and guilt and shame,

it will burst all over the place – bust you up good.” New wine must be put into new wineskins. Become new. Get truly converted. You must be born anew or you will never see the Kingdom of Heaven.

Words? Just old, familiar words? We think we can just form covenants off the tops of our heads? Tack a little Christianity onto the borders of our lives without letting it bother us in any way that really matters? If we are Christians, we are a covenant people. We always have been. We are a people of promise – and of promises. That is what covenant means. Does God keep his promises? Do we keep ours? Have we noticed that one affects the other? If I break the covenant, it eventually becomes impossible for God to fulfill his promises – unless I repent and get back on track. God cannot bless us if we turn away and stay away from all the principles and purposes by which the blessings come. Many people never seem to figure this out.

I want a happy marriage, but want to make love to every skirt that comes down the street? How then will true family life bless me? I want to love God, but keep all my idols? How much will my life be blessed by the love of God? As you know, in our time, loyalty and love for Jesus are seldom translated into love and loyalty for Jesus’ church. I want the blessings of faith and love, but want to be unencumbered by the struggles and challenges of being part of a faith family? Where else would I put my loyalty and devotion here on earth? Is there some other agency or organization that bears His name, carries His truth, honors His presence and guidance? Please tell me where it is. I am eager to know. I would love to be part of an organization – some fellowship – more loyal to Jesus than what I have found so far.

You understand that this last remark is not part of the sermon, just me grumbling for a bit. I have noticed the phenomenon for lo these many years: People claiming to love Jesus, but wanting nothing to do with His mission or Message or purpose here. It seems inexplicable to me. They seem miffed because the church is not perfect, as if that were some kind of excuse to hide behind. I have, as a matter of fact, noticed the same thing. You think you can be a pastor for over fifty years and not notice that the church has flaws and problems? But why tell *you* – you are here!

Inside the church we have the other side of the same coin. Not people who claim to love Jesus but want nothing to do with His church; rather, people who love the church but want nothing to do with Jesus.

There are lots of people inside churches these days who do not love Jesus. They like the architecture, or the music, or the liturgy, or some of the teachings, or some of the meetings and programs, or some of the people they meet. But they are not committed to Jesus as Savior or Lord – not anything close to it. Their lives reveal nothing you would expect from a person who has recognized the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God. There is no real awareness of Jesus, His purposes, or His promises. And if anything gets inconvenient or uncomfortable, they are gone with the wind. If a minister or some member of the congregation offends them and suddenly it interrupts all their loyalty and devotion to Jesus, does that not say something really weird about their loyalty to Jesus?

There is no such thing as a relationship without a covenant. Covenant is not just some fringe concept along the way. It is heart and core of who we are and what we are about. Jeremiah was a faithful prophet for over forty years – watching the disintegration, apostasy, and destruction of his nation. With no hope left in his own lifetime, he was driven to the realization that if God was indeed real and true, some new day would have to come. God would have to bring back the light and the promises in some previously unheard of and unimagined way. It became the heart of Jeremiah's message, and I think the clearest and most powerful prediction of the coming Messiah and the coming of a New Covenant in the entire Old Testament. Six hundred years before Jesus, Jeremiah realized that something like the coming of Jesus and His Holy Spirit would be necessary if God's plans and purposes were ever to move forward.

At the heart of the most important sacrament in all Christendom, Jesus refers specifically to Jeremiah's prophetic message: *"This cup is the New Covenant in my blood."*

"The days are coming when God will make a new covenant – not like the old covenant" Amazing that such blasphemy could have survived in the Old Testament. Moses and Mount Sinai were not enough. After six hundred years, how could the Jews still be surprised when the Apostle Paul insisted that Jesus was not *against* Judaism, but was instead fulfilling Judaism's destiny? Perhaps they thought that Jeremiah was just mouthing words.

A COVENANT PEOPLE

But Jesus boldly states: *“This cup is the New Covenant in my blood.”* More than that, He says it on the evening before He dies. This cup is symbol of life poured out – His life given over – His dying into a New Life for all of us.

When things are written in blood, we are no longer kidding. It has gone past the games. It has gone past the theories. It has gone past the symbolism, though certainly the symbols remain huge and powerful. If we write covenants that still fit easily and comfortably into the old life – the life going on all around us – we are still playing games. God cannot bless us, and Jesus cannot heal and guide and lead us, if we are only play-acting at our love and devotion to Him.

We are a covenant people. There is no such thing as relationship apart from covenant.