

Jeremiah 31:23-34; Luke 22:7-20;  
I Corinthians 11:23-26; II Corinthians 3:4-6

## FROM COVENANT TO COVENANT

As we do the first Sunday of each month, this morning we take communion together. The spectrum of participation is broad. A few of you will not partake at all. That is allowed. No one here intends any coercion. I refused the meal once, years ago, and the repercussions changed my life forever. But I was doing the best I could at the time. Just trying to keep honest, as I am sure you are too. Even truth has its seasons. Some of you will participate in the meal with respect for its place in our tradition, but in a somewhat detached manner. You accept the ritual of our worship service, but it will not reach very deeply into you – at least you do not expect it to this morning. Perhaps at times it has moved you greatly in the past, but you have learned that humans cannot manufacture such things without moving into pretense. So you try to be open and let the Spirit decide what will happen. Others of you consider this sacrament the very core of Christian worship. You are not sure it is an authentic worship service without it. You come to the meal in remembrance of who Jesus is and all He has done for us and goes on doing for us. And for you, communion really is what the word implies: a coming together; an infusion of Christ's presence; a realignment and a renewal of allegiance and love – between us and our Savior, and between us and each other.

There are, quite literally, endless dimensions to this meal. I want to suggest that we focus this morning on participation in this meal as participation in the New Covenant: *“This cup which is poured out for you is the **new covenant** in my blood.”* (Luke 22:20) *“This cup is the **new covenant** in my blood.”* (I Corinthians 11:25) THERE is an offer if we ever heard one! This is an invitation to come be part of Jesus and part of what He is about and what He is trying to accomplish. Blood means LIFE. A covenant sealed in blood has no escape clauses or fine-print loopholes at the bottom of the page. A thing sealed in blood is for keeps, and only death can break the seal – and this ONE has already conquered death. *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”* It is an amazing thing that any of us are willing to drink it. Perhaps we don't understand what we are doing. On the other hand, we keep *trying* to understand – and we drink it anyway. It is the only reason the church still lives, in a world like this.

In trying to understand, we are reminded of one of the strangest dimensions in all of life, a true phenomenon: humans making covenants with God. It is not so strange that humans make covenants with each other, but the truth is that we are not very good at it, and both the benefit and the damage which come from it are enormous.

Covenant is the essence – the core principle – of all civilization. “*It is not good for man [the adam] to be alone.*” It is not good for the man kind – the human being – to be alone. (Genesis 2:18 – not a new concept, folks.) Yet there is no “together” without a covenant. Maybe if I am shrewd enough, fast enough, or strong enough, I can steal your money, your property, or your life and use it for my own purposes. But there is no “together” without a covenant, an agreement, an alliance. Every human who comes into this world survives here because somebody else is thinking about more than self. Some kind of covenant, however imperfect, is in operation or we would all have been dead before that first day was over. Sometimes that gets to those of us who still think we are the Lone Ranger. But every hour since that first day has rested on covenants – depended upon covenants – many of them unnoticed and unappreciated.

Nevertheless, we all grow up (at least in some ways) and get conscious. And over and over in our lives, we have to decide whether to stay alone or to make alliance with others. Every job you have ever held is a covenant. Every relationship you have ever had is a covenant. Our lives are circumscribed by alliances, agreements – covenants we have made or think we have made. All our expectations, hopes, planning – absolutely everything we look forward to, everything we care about – are based on some kind of covenant. Every date you have ever made is a covenant. If the other person breaks it – does not show up – it is not a fun evening. Sometimes if they *do* show up it is not a fun evening, but at least there was a possibility. Every business arrangement, every marriage, every paycheck, every time you purchase anything – it is all based on covenants. If each side lives up to their end of the bargain, everybody benefits. If either side cheats, scrimps, lies, or reneges, there is damage. There are not many things we can do alone. If we form an alliance, we are far stronger than we could possibly have been alone: new possibilities; more ideas; more hands; more places at the same time. From two friends to the nations of the world, the civilizing principle is covenants. But if somebody breaks the covenant – breaks the alliance – then we wish with all our heart that we had stayed alone. If the covenant is broken, we would have been better off to go it alone.

Nobody escapes this crucible. All of us are always asking: Do I dare to enter into this covenant: Marry this person? Take this job? Form this friendship? Join this church? Buy this property? Take this class? If those involved are honorable, it will be wonderful. If not, I will get hurt. All covenants make us vulnerable. We cannot control or guarantee the behavior of the “other people” involved, even though the laws try to pretend we can. Broken covenants are at least ninety percent of all the damage, pain, mayhem, sorrow, fear, discouragement, guilt, and shame that we encounter during our time here on earth.

You caught that new note? That’s right: Not only do others break the agreements, sometimes *we* break them. We are afraid to make alliance because others might break them. We are equally afraid to make covenants for fear that we ourselves will break them. Behind all the pretense, I’m not sure which side of the damage is worse. I do know that in the long run, most of the people I have known prefer the pain of damage inflicted upon them to the pain of damage they have themselves inflicted.

But the strangest phenomenon of all is humans making covenant with God – doing things *together* with God. The whole history of Western Religion is the drama of humans believing that God is inviting them into alliance, into relationship, into covenant. Many folk say that the first broken covenant got us thrown out of the Garden of Eden. But that is too mythic and complex for this morning. Noah certainly had a covenant with God. But the truth is that every religious person who has ever walked the earth has had some kind of covenant with God. You cannot be religious if you do not have a covenant with God. What would your *religiousness* be about? Faith means trusting God. Without a covenant, what is the content of your trust?

There are three huge pillar covenants in the Bible – covenants on which all the lesser covenants hang. We attach the three to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. We could and should spend months and years contemplating each one. But being a master of oversimplification:

1.) Abraham believes God is calling him to leave home, land, relatives – everything he has known – to go from Ur (south of Babylon) through Haran to Canaan (Israel). Heeding this call makes Abraham the first Jew – the Father of Faith, he is often called. God promises protection, land, and “*I will make you father of a multitude of nations*” – I will establish this covenant with you and your descendants: an everlasting covenant. Abraham promises to walk before God

and to circumcise all males of his people as sign of their belonging to God. It is the beginning of the Chosen People – the bearers of God’s will and WAY. *“By you all the families of the earth shall be blessed themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”* (Genesis 22:18)

2.) The Covenant via Moses is often seen as an extension and renewal of the covenant with Abraham. The purpose of that earlier covenant has been sidetracked, and the people end up slaves in Egypt. All is lost, or so it seems. But God uses Moses (not Moses using God), and the Hebrews are freed from Pharaoh’s power. The climax of the story is not crossing the Red Sea – that’s Hollywood exploiting a mistranslation (*yam suph* means “Sea of Reeds,” or “Lake of Reeds”). It’s only God getting the people to where he can do something with them; we keep trying to substitute the details for the main plot.

The climax is Moses bringing the people to the Holy Mountain, where God makes covenant with them. This covenant is a way of life that will bring prosperity and peace to the whole world – if people will keep it. It is Israel’s task not only to keep it themselves, but to spread it to all the peoples of the earth. The most disappointing thing about Israel’s God is that this God always wants to bless everybody. All the other people, clans, and nations have gods who want to favor and bless and fight just for them – make them rich and famous at everybody else’s expense. Israel has the misfortune to get mixed up with a God who cares about *everybody*. They only get chosen to carry and demonstrate a message that is for everybody. *“By you all the families of the earth shall be blessed themselves.... You are a light to the nations.”* (Genesis 22:18; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) Do you think Jesus changed all that – came from a different God? He says to His followers: *“You are the light of the world.... Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:14, 16) I actually know some Christians who quote that verse without realizing what a huge tradition and destiny Jesus is claiming – without understanding that He is claiming and carrying forward the very purpose of Judaism. If we do not read our Bibles, we do not know that He is coming off of Isaiah, and so we miss most of the import of what He is saying.

Anyway, we hint toward this second covenant by speaking of the Ten Commandments. Most of Judaism through most of history has centered around this Torah, this teaching – this will *and* purpose of God spelled out in practical precepts that are supposed to get expressed in righteous behavior. In Christendom, we call it the

Old Covenant, or the Old Testament. In many ways, the language is unfortunate, especially in a society so shallow it thinks anything “old” is outdated and without value. Sometimes “old” means it got there first – that it is foundational; that everything important is built on it. The first great heresy in Christendom was Marcionism. Marcion wanted to throw out the Old Testament. Actually, he wanted to throw out everything except the Gospel of Luke and some of Paul’s letters. But the early church insisted that Marcion did not know what he was talking about – that we really could not understand who Jesus was or what He was bringing to fullness if we threw out everything that told us what Jesus loved and where He was coming from. Whether you mean to be or not, some of you are modern-day Marcionites. You can tell real fast by asking yourself how often you read the Old Testament. In any case, it forces the church to fight this heresy battle all over again.

3.) Jeremiah began his ministry in 626 B.C. That was a long time before Jesus. If you count back that many years from today, you would be in 1372. Edward III was King of England; Charles V was King of France. The Bubonic Plague had just swept Europe, and we were in the middle of the Hundred Years’ War. Nobody had even heard of America, never mind Corona del Mar. (I know there were Indians here, and people in China too.) The point is, six centuries is a long time.

There were three great prophet/king teams in the history of Israel. Jeremiah and Josiah were the last of the three. Jeremiah spent forty years trying to prepare his people for inevitable defeat and disaster. He was the ultimate outcast, the most unpopular prophet in history. His ministry ended with Jerusalem in ruins, the temple destroyed, the people carried captive into Babylon. As Jeremiah had been the doomsayer through all the years when his country was pretending greatness and prosperity, so now, with everybody in despair, Jeremiah preaches hope. Now that they have lost all the outer stuff, Jeremiah tells them that if they pick up their side of the covenant, they will find God eager and ready to pick up his side too, and then soon they will be back in the story, doing what they should have been doing all along.

Just a few years before that, Jeremiah had seen that the Jewish Destiny could never work the way it was going – the way his people had tried to work it thus far. God would have to do something new and different or we simply would not make it – we would not get very

far or maintain the purpose for very long. In perhaps the most eerie passage in the entire Old Testament, Jeremiah realizes that God must establish a New Covenant. He does not know, of course, how God will do it or what exactly it will look like. But he knows that if there is a God and if God is faithful and caring like Judaism believes, then a New Covenant becomes a logical necessity. As you just heard, Jeremiah lines out some of the earmarks or essential ingredients of the New Covenant (or New Testament) and it is uncannily close to a description of LIFE in Christ Jesus – LIFE in the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is not Christian propaganda; this is out of the heart and mind of Israel’s greatest prophet – over six hundred years before Jesus was born. If that doesn’t make the hair stand up on the back of your neck, you should get a new neck.

Jesus, of course, loved and studied the prophets. He knew by heart everything they had said, and He incorporated the best He could find from each of them into His own mind and into the design of His own ministry. “*This cup is the **new covenant** in my blood: Jeremiah, my brother, dear and faithful forerunner, you were right and I am here. We were not destroyed in Babylon, just as you predicted. And we will no longer build it on great cities, like Jerusalem, or let it depend on temples, however beautiful or holy – it will no longer be dependent on any political nation or state. Yes, my far-seeing friend, from now on we write it on the heart, and only those who feel and trust the love of God – and return love for love – will hear it or know it or receive it or live for it. But they will. More and more, they will. From now on, my Kingdom is not of this world. Yet it is here in this world more truly than ever before.*”

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From a calling ... to a code ... to an ongoing conversation.  
From prosperity ... to righteousness ... to grace. From circumcision ... to great precepts ... to a personal relationship. Obedience is essential to all three, yet the flavor of obedience feels different. And always, in this world, we seem to picture the three covenants as if they were separate – as if they were supposed to fight each other. When do we realize that they come *out* of each other? Can there be a Moses without an Abraham? Can there be a Jesus if Moses and Abraham have not done their work? Why do so few of us realize that every individual who comes to earth must grow through all three covenant phases if they are to grow at all?

If you skip Abraham and go straight to Moses, you have no identity. You have no calling. You obey a list of rules and have no idea why or what they are about. No joy. No community. No awareness that you or anybody else are special.

If you skip Moses and go straight to Jesus, do you get it all faster? **Grace without Law is incomprehensible.** How can we understand forgiveness if we cannot fathom that we have done anything wrong? How can we understand mercy if we do not know that there are places in our own hearts that are ugly and far away from God? Christians without any Moses are not saints; they are just spoiled brats – people who have never learned to take responsibility, put forth honest effort, or be accountable for their behavior. Christians without Moses try to help and love others without expecting any honor or honesty from them – without seeing them as valuable or worthy or as having a spiritual destiny of their own. The deepest put-down on earth is to be “loved” by a Christian who has forgotten Moses.

We go from covenant to covenant. The world does, history does, and we do as individuals. And we never graduate from them; they build on each other. Every time we revisit and renew them in God’s presence, we learn a little more, get blessed a little deeper, find the light a little more incredible – as the world gets smaller and God’s Kingdom gets bigger.

So what has all this got to do with the fact that next Sunday is Covenant Sunday in this church? And that each one of us is supposed to be praying about and spending time contemplating our own individual covenants: the response we hope to make in the coming year because WE ARE THE CHURCH – the body of Christ – in this place, at this time? For some of you, I guess, there is no connection. I think that is really sad. But for lots of you, there is endless connection – more than you can keep up with – as you realize that you are part of it now, all the way back to Abraham. I think that’s wonderful! And I am very grateful, as I wrestle with my own covenant, to know that so many of you are wrestling with yours too. That is part of the bond which makes us part of each other, and which connects us to all those who have tried to be faithful through all the years before us. How truly wonderful that God still calls us to be his people! How exciting – and humbling – that we still get to respond.

It may be, however, that I need to remind a few of you that we never get to finish our covenants – that is, this is not a game for perfectionists. We go from covenant to covenant. The day comes and we turn them in at whatever stage they have reached – for now. They reflect what we care about, enough to keep us moving and growing. They tell us where we are. The Holy Spirit can take it from there. Procrastination is mostly the fear of not being good enough. Hey, in comparison to Jesus, that is a foregone conclusion! Perfection is not our aim. Sincere response – as who we are, from where we are – is our aim. When you stop to think about it, making a covenant from any other stance is not going to make any difference anyway. Jesus always invites us to a “come as you are” party. That is the only way we get to be His church – and the only way we can come to His communion.