

Sermon: Covenants Joshua 24:1-14 October 16 2022
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When a couple gets married, they exchange vows. Some write their own vows. Some choose traditional wording. The vows are the center of the ceremony and couples put thought into the words they say. One bride here a few years ago really put a lot of thought into her vows- pausing in the middle of them for at least 30 seconds before continuing on... the thoughtful delay causing some quiet panic for the groom and in the congregation.

One couple years ago in another place paid a particular kind of attention to the vows that they exchanged. He was a Crown Attorney. She was a Provincial court judge. And they saw their vows as a legal covenant, which they are. Being people of the law, they paid a different kind of attention to the words they exchanged, knowing there were legal implications to their marriage covenant. They really did not want to enter into obligations that they could not fulfill.

The Biblical narrative abounds with covenants. God and God's people enter into agreements, into committed relationship with obligations and promises. Again, and again commitments are made...

When a modern couple gets married it is an equal partnership. Biblical covenants are a bit different. They are modeled on the covenant between a king or queen and their people. With Biblical covenants, God is the superior partner.

The first covenant is made in Eden. It includes the care of creation and the promise not to eat forbidden fruit. Humanity breaks that agreement and so after the flood there is a renewal of the covenant and it's sealed with a rainbow. Then when that goes wrong, God renews the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, promising them a land and descendants as numerous as the stars.

Next comes the Mosaic Covenant. After delivering God's people from slavery in Egypt, God calls Moses up the Mountain in the Sinai wilderness and makes a new covenant, with the rules and obligations set in stone.

Which brings us to the story shared today. Moses has led the people of God through the wilderness to the edge of the Promised Land. Moses sees the land, but it is his successor Joshua who leads the people into the land.

And after carving out a place in this new home, Joshua prepares the people of God for the next step; he will no longer be leading them. So, he calls the people together and offers them a chance to renew the covenant once again.

And with words that are inscribed on plaques and on mugs that are woven into quilts and tapestries Joshua famously encourages the people by stating his own commitment. "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Joshua will renew his covenant with God. Those gathered in Shechem long ago are invited to do the same.

The people, inspired by Joshua's example, remembering all the things God has done, delivering them from slavery, leading them through wilderness, giving the covenant and the law, giving them a land flowing with milk and honey, they say: "We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

And in response Joshua says, essentially, are you sure? It's a big commitment. Maybe you want to think about it for a while.

Maybe Joshua remembers the big story; the repetition of God offering a covenant, a special relationship with people agreeing then falling away.

But the people before Joshua follow his lead and say, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him." With Joshua at Shechem the covenant is made again

Maybe Joshua was right to be skeptical. After this covenant is made, the Book of Joshua ends and Joshua's leadership closes,

Next in the story is the Book of Judges.

The story of Judges is cyclical- a pattern repeats again and again. The people fall away from God. The people suffer. God has compassion. God raises up an emergency leader called a Judge to lead- like Deborah – the first Judge, who leads Israel out of danger. The people renew their relationship with God

And then in Judges the cycle repeats. Covenant renewed. People fall away. People suffer. God calls a leader. Covenant renewed. And around we go again.

After the Judges there are more covenants. God makes a covenant with David and later according to the prophet Jeremiah, when Israel suffers in exile, God longs to write a new covenant on the hearts of God's people. And the followers of Jesus speak of a new Covenant in Jesus.

There is a very old communion prayer that encapsulates the covenants made between God and God's people

We give you praise, God most holy, for you are great, and you have fashioned all your works in wisdom and in love. You formed us in your own image and entrusted the whole world to our care,

And when we failed in our friendship with you, you did not abandon us ... Time and again you offered us covenants and through the prophets called us to faithfulness

And you so loved the world that in the fullness of time you sent your Son to be our Savior.

In the story today the famous words are Joshua's "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

But in the bigger narrative it is not Joshua inspirational faithfulness that catches the eye. It is the dogged, persistent faithfulness of God, coming back again and again to offer commitments and to renew relationships out of love. The center of the story is the faithfulness of God.

So two things for reflection...

First - God is faithful to the covenants God made. And many of these covenants were made with God's people Israel. The Jewish people are God's chosen and God is devotedly faithful to them.

When the Apostle Paul writes of God's faithfulness in Romans Chapter 9, he suggests that the new covenant in Jesus does not eliminate the other covenants God made with Israel. God will always be faithful to promises made, to the Jews, to the followers of Jesus.

In a time when prejudice and discrimination is rising, racism, sexism, transphobia... antisemitism is also on the rise. And as followers of Jesus, we need to remember that the Jewish people are beloved of God, people of the Covenant to whom God is ever faithful, and we are grafted onto Israel's ancient tree. God is faithful to all the promises God has made.

And God is faithful to us. We may fall away. We get distracted. We forget about God, or an experience turns us. Or somehow, we become unsure of God. We can remember that God is always pursuing us, always ready to start again.

Roberta Bondi, an American spiritual writer, offers a suggestion on how we might turn to God, or renew our acquaintance with the Holy, if we feel distant or unsure.

The simplest prayer she writes, is to invite God to simply be present in whatever we are doing. Invite God to be with you as you sit and read a book. Invite Jesus to share the path with you on your daily walk. Play piano and invite God to be there with you. Take your time and renew your trust in the one who is ever ready to enter relationship with you again.

AMEN