

Haydenville Congregational Church

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Genesis 9:8-17

Genesis 17:1-7

“Promises, Covenants and Oaths”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

*Then the Lord said to Noah, ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.’
And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him.*

Genesis 7:1-6

According to the Book of Genesis, God saw that the wickedness of humankind was so great on earth, that “every inclination of the thoughts of all human hearts was only evil,” and God was sorry that God had made humankind and so God decided to blot out from the earth all human beings except for Noah, who was righteous.

We know this sad story.

The flood comes and everyone is lost, except for Noah and his family and the pairs of animals on the ark. When the flood subsides, God tells Noah and his family to take the animals, leave the ark and be fruitful and multiply. And then God—maybe filled with regret, who are we to know—makes a promise to Noah: I will never do that again. God makes a promise: I will not do that again.

*I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...
nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.*

Genesis 8:21

God makes a promise to Noah and then God hangs a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of God’s promise, a sign that God will never again destroy all of humanity.

A few chapters later in the Book of Genesis, we find God making promises again...this time God is making a covenant with Abram.

The Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you...' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Genesis 17:1-7

God chooses Abram and makes a covenant that Abram, to be called Abraham, with his wife Sarah, will bring forth offspring who will give rise to nations, kings will come from them. God makes a covenant with Abraham, God makes promises to him.

Covenants and promises...they hold a place of great importance in the Bible, for God makes promises to God's people, and God makes covenants with God's people. For Jews and for Christians, covenants and promises have a long, important history in both traditions.

So what is a covenant and what does it have to do with our life today?

The Hebrew word for covenant, *berith*, denotes an arrangement between two parties. It is a promise, a pledge, an oath, a binding agreement between two individuals or groups.

The entire Old Testament, also called the Old Covenant, is really one long story about the covenant created and lived between God and the people of Israel.

The New Testament, also called the New Covenant, is the story of the renewal and extension of that covenant through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

For both Christians and Jews in ancient time and still today, a covenant is an agreement, a promise to be in relationship with one another, to be faithful to that relationship, and to be accountable to one another.

God says to Abraham, I will make you the patriarch of Israel. You in turn will be faithful to me. I will be your God, and you will be my people.

God says to Noah, I promise not to blot out all of humanity ever again.
And in turn you and your offspring promise to be righteous.
The mutual responsibilities between God and God's people are a constant refrain
in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

Covenants and promises involve faithfulness, loyalty, righteousness and accountability. They are not contracts, treaties or deals.
They are agreements to be in relationship with one another, to lift up and enhance the goodness in that relationship and to be accountable to each other.
We make promises with and to God and God makes promises as well.

And so what about today? Are we still making covenants today? Yes we are!
Covenants and promises hold meaning and relevance for us today because our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is based on the concept of a covenantal relationship. In this Church, in the UCC, we not bound to each other through creeds, tests or statements of faith. What binds us to each other is our covenant to listen for the word of God, to follow in the ways of Jesus, to be Christ-like in our behaviors, to share the good news and to do all this together. What binds us to each other in this Church and in the wider UCC is our covenant with one another, our promise to be faithful, to walk TOGETHER toward the light of God, to be in communion with the divine and in community with each other.

Many of you have been present when new members have formally joined this Church. Some 110 people have gone through "Exploring Membership" classes in the last 3 ½ years and have stood here, in front of the Altar, before the congregation and affirmed their covenant with God and this Church family. The UCC does not ask new members to recite the Statement of Faith, to profess one, defined understanding of Jesus, to denounce other faiths or beliefs, or to swear single-minded allegiance to some UCC set of principles, tenets or values. In a simple ceremony, which at its core is a celebratory welcome to the Church family, we ask new members to enter into a covenant with us. We ask:

Do you desire to affirm your commitment to the spirit of love embodied by Christ?
Do you renounce the powers that divide us and honor the divinity in each of us?
Do you promise to follow in the way of Christ, to resist oppression, to show love and justice, and to witness with your life to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best as you are able?
Do you promise to grow in the Christian faith, recognizing that you are a member of the community of people of faith throughout the world, celebrating Christ's presence, and furthering Christ's mission of peace, compassion, justice, inclusion and love?

Do you promise to participate in the life and mission of the Haydenville Congregational Church, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the work of this church as it serves the community and the world?

And then the candidates state their love for and loyalty to God in their prayer:
O God, my God, known to us in Jesus Christ, I give myself to you as your own, to love and serve you faithfully all the days of my life.

And the congregation stands and says:

We welcome you with joy into the life of this church and our church family. We promise you our friendship and prayers as we share together the hopes and labors of the wider Church of Jesus Christ, and this our church home, the Haydenville Congregational Church.

Friends, just as in ancient times, we—as people of faith, as people of God today—make promises to God and to each other. We covenant to be in relationship with one another and with God, we promise to be accountable to each other and to God. Our covenant is both all that we have, and the best that we have.

Promises, covenants and oaths do not depend on a written document, the presence of a lawyer, a signed treaty or contract...they depend on our word and our will. Promises, covenants and oaths are rooted in the belief that we are at our core honorable, truthful and that we will be faithful to our word...that our inner life, our deepest commitments and principles, will guide our outer lives—our behaviors, actions and speech. **As people of faith, we trust and believe that our lives can be shaped by speaking and cherishing inspiring words, by making and living up to powerful promises.**

Our foremothers and forefathers in the United Church of Christ, the Puritans and the Pilgrims, followed the examples in the Bible—they believed in covenants and they wrote some of their own. Many early Churches in this country, in New England specifically, wrote Church covenants. Following the examples found in the Bible, the early Christian Churches—white churches like ours, with tall steeples, perched in the center of New England towns, often on the town green—prayerfully wrote covenants to guide their lives as communities bound to God and to each other.

The oldest Church covenant in New England—the one that inspired so many covenants that followed—is The Salem Covenant written in 1629.

Listen to this spare and moving covenant written by our ancestors in the UCC:

*We Covenant with the Lord and one with another;
and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways,
according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth.*

Succinct and poignant...

We covenant with God and one with another—that is the promise.

I pledge to be in relationship with God and with you...

I bind myself, in the presence of God, to walk together with you in all of God's ways.

Today, almost 400 years after it was written, The Salem Covenant reflects the same promises we still make in the UCC—to covenant with God, to walk in God's ways one with another. We promise to bind ourselves to God and to each other. In this denomination—this no frills, flat hierarchy, inclusive, progressive, very New England denomination, the United Church of Christ—our covenant to be in relationship with God and with each and to be accountable to God and to each other is both all that we have, and the best that we have.

And so today I renew my covenant with you, with words said at my ordination years ago and at my installation just 3 ½ years ago here at this Church.

I will walk with you in the ways of our Lord

I will, with your support, try to be Christ-like in my behaviors.

I will with the help of God and the support of my faith community work for justice, promote peace, be loving and generous and stand with those on the margins of power.

I will with your help be strong in the face of adversity and courageous in enacting my faith, summoning guidance from the Holy Spirit.

I promise to walk with God WITH YOU, recognizing that in the context of a faith community I can experience the words, work and witness of Jesus in new and powerful ways.

I recognize that I am accountable to you and you are accountable to me and when one of us mis-steps, when you or I are misguided, when you or I fall down or lose our way, we will confront each other with love, help each other to learn and to grow, and guide one another to the path toward God AGAIN.

I am in covenant with God and with you. I recognize that my covenant with God and with you is both a blueprint, a map that guides my current behavior and a goal, a vision I am always trying to achieve.

And I recognize that our covenant—our word and our will, our promises to God and to each other—are all that we have, and the best that we have.

And so we move forward rejoicing in our covenant together,
living inside that covenant together—the RELATIONSHIP we have tended and nurtured with God and with each.

We recognize and celebrate the reality that our relationship with God gives our lives meaning,
and our relationship with each other keeps our feet to the fire!

Amen.