

# Covenant: Old Concept, New Possibilities

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Exodus 19: 1-8

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Covenant season is upon us: November 14 will be Covenant Sunday. Your packets are available on the patio. (You can understand how it helps our planning and preparing for next year if we're all on time.) Will you be part of our goal of 100% compliance to get our covenants turned in on time this year? OK—I have to confess this means me, too. One year I turned in mine on December 31.)

Forgive us, if you are newer guests or not yet members here with us this morning—you are most welcome, but we've got some "family business" to cover. If you're interested in learning more about this church or in allowing us to know you better, please come to our two "get acquainted" Q and A sessions following Worship Oct. 31 and Nov. 7. If for some reason you know you cannot or will not be able to commit yourself to become part of this church family, you're still always welcome, but I urge you to keep moving, keep checking out other churches. Don't keep dating us because of the cute building or the marvelous choir or any other reason. Who does God want you one day to marry?

There are many systems of governing churches: those ruled by canon law, those you join by creedal assent, those who will check your W-2 to be sure you are tithing before you can join, and others. Then there's ours—Congregationalist. Here, each member accepts responsibility for his/her own faith and practice. No copouts, no excuses; no one to rescue us. We value our freedom; we decide our own affairs and our own theology; no one tells us what we have to do or believe. Our covenant system is a great system as long as we recognize it's great insofar as it removes obstacles to our relationship with God, and encourages each of us to go deeper. Our covenant, Congregational "freedom" is designed to set us free to hear and obey the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ. It is no democracy. There's no magic in any church structure or polity—its virtue is in allowing us or any other church freely, joyfully, to serve and grow in Christ.

I'd like to cover three main areas this morning: 1) What does the word or concept "covenant" mean? 2) What can we learn from the Scripture lesson with Moses, and 3) What difference does this ask of us in this church this morning? (By the way this morning we'll stick with this old covenant; we'll come to the "new covenant" in Christ next time.)

I "Covenant" is an old word; an old concept. Today we may need to be reminded or taught what a "covenant" is—but in the Ancient Near East everyone knew. (This English word comes from "con venire," in Latin, or "gather together," as we do in worship; it's "berit" in Hebrew: this root is related to chains or fetters.)

A covenant is not a contract or mutual business agreement. A covenant agreement was a binding, unbreakable obligation entered into by two parties. (For our purposes) it was often motivated not by mercenary motives but by unconditional love and sealed by sacred oath and by the shedding of blood. It specifies stipulations for keeping or breaking the covenant obligation, and specifies divine punishment if one party later tries to weasel out. A covenant can only be annulled by death.

The God revealed in the Bible is a covenant God. God had initiated covenants with Noah and Abraham before Moses. Thousands of times when we read of God as One marked by steadfast love or loving kindness or mercy or other synonyms, we are hearing God is a covenant God. (For example, Psalm 51:1: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." David can plead for divine forgiveness following his great transgressions with Bathsheba and then his premeditated homicide against Uriah in this way not because God is a Nice Guy or not paying attention, but because God has promised to love Israel with an unbreakable, "berit" covenant love strong as iron chains.)

God is our covenant partner, and "God is love." If only you and I could trust God enough, and His divine love for us, to overcome our conditioning, our suspicions, our self-doubt. When "God is love"—if only we could really trust it—then "chains" and "shackles" are not frightening but become welcome images of our being bonded to God, never to be let go and never again to be free to drift away into indifference, cynicism, and complacency. (This remains our free choice, to be bound with the living God to be able to reach our ultimate potential and our eternal joy. Although we fear it is so, God will never try to impose His will on us because He has a bigger club.) God does not hold us in bondage to exploit us—but like a faithful captain lashing His sailors to the mast in the midst of a storm to prevent him them from being washed overboard, so God allows us to be lashed to Him—to safety, to strength, to love.

God cannot break His word, cannot break His covenant promise. (The covenant is guaranteed, in the end, by the character of the parties to it. The promises of God are irrevocable; the lovingkindness and forgiveness of God are forever.) I know that we Americans deep down in our soul prize independence and self-sufficiency. However much or little we are yet able to trust it yet, we can begin to understand that this covenant bond offered us by the God who knows us and loves us and calls us by name, and who will not give up on us, is a good thing.

II Our lesson from Exodus (19:1-8) is instructive of many themes having to do with God's covenant with the Israelites, and with us.

“The LORD called to Moses.” [v 3] Always it is God who pursues us, who knows us, who keeps coming after us. We don't need to impress God, find God, beg God to be present with us or listen to our prayers. God is; God does. Nothing we can do can make God love us any more; nothing we do can make God love us any less.

The LORD God often refers to Himself as the One who has acted in human history. “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you up [out of slavery Egypt] on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.” [v 4] This God active in history is not one whom we need to imagine as the ancient Greeks and Romans did to fill their pantheons; not one we need to intellectually and theoretically posit, as Plato and Socrates did; not one we need to encounter through mystical visions and revelations through a great angel, as the prophet Mohammed did. These are all valid approaches, but it is the LORD God alone—no other gods—who can be known by our paying attention to the historical human record in space and time; it is this God who comes down and offers to become our covenant partner.

This God further makes Moses a conditional promise: “if you people obey My voice and keep My covenant” then you all shall be My treasured possession; a holy nation and a priestly kingdom out of all the nations of the earth. The whole earth is Mine: but I am offering this covenant relationship to you all alone...” [vv 5-6] (Now this is a staggering claim: for almost thousand years more, deities were understood as local gods and goddesses over defined regions or cities: to be a resident of Memphis, capital of Egypt, was the same as worshiping Osiris; Marduk was god of Babylon and therefore every Babylonian; Baal, the god of Samaria in Canaan—times hundreds, times thousands throughout the world. Mountain gods, city gods, household gods, rain gods, fertility gods, river gods, grain gods, fire gods, moon gods, etc, etc, etc.

Somehow Moses got this vision that the LORD God was God over all the earth...a breakthrough in human

history—and that further, this One God was not going to crush the Israelites or demand their firstborn baby or their daughters to become cultic prostitutes to appease Him. (Where in the world do you suppose Moses would have gotten such an idea?) Instead, God offered for this little tribe of covenant partners, out of all the rich and powerful peoples on earth, to become His treasured possession. (This word applies to the treasures of the king, such as the crown jewels of England guarded in the Tower of London. They have both intrinsic value as gemstones and gold—but additional value because they belonged to kings and queens.) God regards each of you in covenant relationship with Him as His most highly valued treasure. Can you believe that?

God also promises that insofar as His covenant partners will obey His word and keep His covenant then He will make them into a holy nation and a priestly kingdom. (Even God can only keep His own part of the bargain; even God can only work His own side of the street; even God needs our full willing cooperation in covenant partnership.)

But the promise is that God's people become a “holy” nation. This isn't saying they all became holy priests and or nuns dressed in pious black, or they never said a bad word or raised their voice. (Only much later did “holy” begin to refer to ethics or morals; initially “holy” meant “set apart for a particular purpose;” “dedicated for something special and not ordinary.” In this sense the Christmas platter you only use for the Christmas dinner once a year is “holy” because you don't use it for microwaved leftover lasagna when someone drops in unexpected. In this sense the Communion chalice we use is “set apart” for a dedicated purpose.) God sees each of you as “holy,” your lives set apart not for ordinary living but as dedicated to obeying the leading of His Spirit and living in every respect as God directs. God sees you as a holy person and us as a holy church: set apart for His service. You are a success if you obey God. You are a hero, a heroine, if you remain faithful. No matter what the world thinks. No matter what you think. You are a hero if you obey God.

God describes His covenant people also as a “priestly kingdom.” [v 6] This is also an extraordinary privilege: it was the priests who had access to the Presence of God (later on, into the temple and into its sacred place only the priests were permitted to enter.) The priests were the mediators, the “go-betweens” between God and the people; they offered prayers for the people up to God and heard the will of God coming down and then they went out to broadcast it to the people. The priests worked in the holy places but then also went out among the people.

(Unlike those priests, God invites you and me, male and female, unworthy and worthy, clean and unclean, into covenant with Him. We may hear His voice and He hears our petitions and prayers—then each of us will be sent out on our God assignment, authorized to present and re-present God in Christ to others. Ambassadors of the gospel of His love; missionaries of the Most High—each of us has our sphere of influence. We may never leave our home, but we each have our assignment as members of “His priestly kingdom.”)

There’s one more element in this account of Moses—he himself acting as priest, hearing the voice of God atop Mt Sinai and coming down and presenting this covenant invitation to the people Israel. They get to decide; they have a say. In just the same way, God allows us freely to agree or disagree, to be faithful or unfaithful. We may obey, and live according to the power of the Holy Spirit, or we may reject the covenant and rebel, going it alone. God will not scare us into compliance.

We heard their answer to Moses: “All the people” quickly respond: “Everything that the LORD has spoken, we will do.” [v 8]

So eager, so expectant...and so naïve. A few weeks later these very same people, not three months after God had miraculously and dramatically led them thru the Red Sea, these are the very ones who were egging on Aaron to fashion the golden calf so they could bow down to it.

Have you ever tried to keep a significant promise to God? Have you ever committed yourself to a new discipline for God’s sake? Ever promised yourself you’d exercise more, or drink less, or stop thinking negative thoughts, or watch less TV, or give up sugar and empty carbs and eat more healthy, or give up gossiping and trying to control others, or go beyond your comfort zone for God, or expand the range of your generosity, or stop pretending you don’t hear that persistent “still small voice” of the Spirit whispering to you, leading you into new possibilities? I know. I know. Those Israelites were not the only ones to be so naïve and so incapable.

III We’ve learned about some of the attributes of a biblical covenant, and we’ve noted some of what God was promising to Moses and through him to the covenant people, Israel.

Now let’s come back from Moses at Mt Sinai over 3000 years ago back into this sanctuary this morning, 2010. Let’s think about new possibilities. Many of us face two main possibilities of entering into a formal covenant agreement in our lifetime—the covenant of marriage and the covenant of belonging to a church.

Trish and I exchanged our covenant marriage vows almost

22 years ago in what happened to be a Congregational church in CT. She understood very well at the time what our marriage vows meant: guess what the inscription on the inside of my wedding ring says? “NO MATTER WHAT.”

You know what? In all that time she has not left me. Have I always deserved her constancy? No. Have I always treated her as she deserves to be treated? No. Has she ever said, “I’ve had it, that’s it, I’m outta here?” No. (Has she ever thought that or felt like taking a break? She would be justified, but you’d have to ask her.)

Were you ever frustrated with your mate, or merely less passionate than you felt the day you were married? No surprise there. You’re human. But let’s say it’s been bad for a while and you’re about ready to give up. You have two choices at that point: either get out, call it quits...or re-dedicate yourself and do something different. See one of your pastors about it; maybe hear a new perspective to break the logjam. Maybe allow God to bring back a sense of hope into what had gotten pretty grim. Get back into the habit of “date night” the way you did when you were courting. Be truthful about the ways your behavior is hurting the marriage, and give the Spirit permission to transform you. Focus on your spouse’s good habits rather than on what drives you crazy. Tell others about those good qualities—never mention the others. Quit trying to fix him or her. (It’s a long list, isn’t it, of things we can do to make things better. If we will dedicate ourselves.)

As a result of our persevering, “no matter what,” Trish and I have enjoyed possibilities we could never have imagined otherwise. God has given us two great children; God has allowed us to face moves across country and challenges and adventures together which have enriched us both and drawn us closer together (most of the time.)

This morning marks the beginning of this four week period you and I are invited to begin to seek God’s will about how we each one choose to covenant to be a member of this church in 2011. We each face new possibilities as we pray about our 2011 involvement—and God can do more with all of us fired up than with some of us only. Like a marriage: have you been discouraged at some point? Have I or Heather or someone else disappointed you? (Have you come to speak to us about it?) Have your feelings been hurt? (These things can happen, when we get deeply involved with one another and it’s just us sinners around here.) Has church gotten old and routine for you?

We all have two choices: one is to back off and throttle down. We know how easy is that option—and we know where it usually leads. The other is to seek the Holy Spirit

and choose to become even more available; offer ourselves in new ways. However we feel, every Sunday—every day—is a good day to rededicate ourselves in service to God.

I love many things about this church: even now there are teachers willing to miss their own worship teaching our children and teens across the courtyard. Many of you have served on a faith team, preparing and providing for the rest of us behind the scenes. A number of you are visiting and cheering up those who may not be able to drive, or going through a rough spell. Most Monday nights the boards and committees are full with people here offering their time and talents in costly ways—and usually there's a lot of laughter and joy. Even at trustee meetings where we discuss buildings and budgets! Some of you were out helping at the sandcastle contest at Big Corona willing to look foolish for the church, and in front of quite a few people. You are teaching literacy to children, volunteering at Hoag and serving others in ways that only God knows. Here you meet together in small groups almost every day; prayers are being prayed and lives being enriched every day.

I would love to be a member in a church whose people would do anything for Jesus and for one another. You too, evidently.

Many of you know that the covenant packets you may pick up today will ask you to pray about how you may or may not be willing to commit to worshiping God every Sunday, to practicing spiritual disciplines, to commit to a small group and maybe to other retreats or opportunities; to offer your time and service on a board or committee or faith team or otherwise; to be faithful in sharing the gospel of God's love in Jesus, and to support the church with your tithe (10% of your income) or some other proportion.

Together the Spirit can do much more with us than individually.

What if you keep remembering it is God in Christ with whom you are covenanting: the God who sees you as a royal treasure, as part of Christ's "holy" church whose life is "holy" and especially set apart, dedicated to serving our Lord first. What if you remember that God sees you as a holy "priest;" that God is eager to speak to you personally and eager to hear your prayers for others.

What if you knew God is reaching out to you today, His covenant love overcoming every transgression you have ever committed—even those of thinking too small, playing it too safe?

What if God were inspiring you beyond where you are

now comfortable, because you know you will enjoy new possibilities and new strength together as we all stretch together in obedience?

What if you knew you could absolutely abandon yourself to the covenant God whose character guarantees His promises to stay with you when you deserve it and even when you do not, and who promises to pursue you and love you and fill you up and send you forth?

What if...?

(Oh, yeah...you do know.)

## **Exodus 19:1-8**

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is Mine, but you shall be for Me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'"

So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. The people all answered as one: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do."