

## ***Covenant***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion

The First Sunday of Stewardship Season

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

October 7, 2018

Text: Genesis 17: 1-8

“Covenant” is a word which comes up a lot in church. At least it does in the United Church of Christ because our entire polity or governing structure is grounded in the concept of covenant. At its most basic, a covenant is an agreement between two or more parties. It’s sort of like a contract in that regard but the word covenant implies much more than just a legal agreement. For example, a real estate purchase and sales agreement is a contract, a legal document spelling out the detailed terms of said agreement which both parties agree to abide by as indicated by signatures. There is an aspect of covenant in this arrangement but they are not interchangeable ideas.

Similarly, covenant is also sort of like a promise between one or more parties in which someone agrees to act in a particular way. Or in some cases, NOT act in a particular way. For example, a teenager desperately wanting to borrow the car will promise not to be out later than the agreed upon time but circumstances and peer pressure often end up making it all too easy to set that promise aside. So too with promises like marriage vows, or even the vows we make for our children at baptism. These are

essentially promises we make with ourselves to honor the relationships with people dear to us in a particular way. Promises, then, evoke an emotional response in a way that contracts do not. But still, a promise is not a covenant.

So, where does that leave covenant? It too is an agreement between two or more parties, but it is much more than a legal agreement. In fact, it can be argued that the legal considerations of a covenant while present are not primary. So, does that mean it's more like a promise, that agreement between two or more parties with a decidedly emotional component to it? In some ways, yes, because a covenant to be a covenant requires a deep emotional commitment from the parties involved from the start. A covenant embodies the entirety of the relationship between the two parties in a way that neither a contract nor a promise could ever do. A covenant implies the stakes are high and the reasons for making it have the potential to be life altering. A covenant, in other words, is the big time in the world of agreements and nowhere is this more visible than in the stories in the Bible with covenant at the center.

The text we read this morning is one of the most significant stories about covenant in the Bible, and arguably in history. These eight verses describe the covenant God establishes with Abraham who, as a result, becomes the father of three of the world's great religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is

called a covenant of grant because while God has expectations of Abraham, God is granting Abraham – essentially because he is Abraham – the status of being the “ancestor of a multitude of nations.” God says to Abraham, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” That’s pretty much it. I will be your God and you will walk with me. That’s the covenant. And because you walk with me I will make you the ancestor of multitudes. Pretty simple. Basic even. Straight-forward. Seems ordinary, almost. Only one little problem here and Abraham knew it right away. Abraham had no children. At the age of 99, he was childless. His wife Sarai, soon to become Sarah, was barren. So, how was he to become the father of multitudes, the ancestor of nations?

Well, God anticipates this question from Abraham and answers it before he can ask it. “I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.” And Abraham, who has now been given a new name by God as a sign of his new status with God as a result of the covenant, has got to be thinking – but I’m 99 and I have no children! Come on, God!! Who are you trying to kid? But, God is still rambling on telling Abraham all that is going to happen because he is now Abraham’s God. This is an everlasting covenant, God explains. It is with you and all of these multitudes of ancestors yet to be born!

This is a great thing, Abraham! Get excited! This is big news! I am your God and the God of all your children and your children's children forever. And, oh by the way, I'm also going to give you and your ancestors the land of Canaan.

Yikes! No wonder the text says Abraham fell on his face. How else would you respond to something like this? God says I will be your God and you and your offspring will accept me as your God for all eternity. That's the covenant. High stakes for sure. Simple terms – I will be your God and you will be my people and I will give you this chunk of real estate in the bargain to be yours. But, holy cow, God's vision shared with Abraham in this moment is that this covenant will be binding not only on 99 year old Abraham and his yet unborn children but on all the generations of those children yet to come as well. To infinity and beyond! Wow. Just like the talking toys in Toy Story.

Not hardly. This covenant between Abraham and God is much more than an ancient story about a man identified by God as worthy of being the father of an entire international community of faith, important as that is. It is a story which has had impacts still felt in the world today. We hear and see it in the news of the Middle East every week as the tensions there ebb and flow, war and the threat of war never far away. That's because the land of Canaan God promised to Abraham and his descendants forever is still a very real place but with different names in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

world. Israel, Palestine, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt all are contained within, partially or completely, by the land our text this morning refers to as Canaan. Perhaps you can see the problem. All three of the religions which claim Abraham as their father also claim all or part of this region as their birthright as Abraham's descendants. Of course, it's a lot more complicated than that. Oil, the legacy of colonialism and the intervention of well-meaning Allies who created Israel for the Jews in the aftermath of World War II are huge factors in the Middle East conundrums of today. But at least part of the challenge to be faced is that for most of the parties in disagreement in the Middle East, the proof of the validity of their claims to this ancient land is the ancient covenant whose terms we read today. The kicker is, they're all right.

The irony here is that, vociferous claims on all sides notwithstanding, religion has very little to do with the reality of the Middle East today. Some want to believe it does, and of course religion is a factor. But, dear friends, God is no where to be found in the deaths of innocent civilians in wars or terrorist attacks or disputes over who lives where and who works where. God is no where present in mortar attacks promulgated by both sides for the flimsiest of reasons. God is no where present when homes are bulldozed or people are murdered just because of the faith they practice, routine occurrences in much of this area today.

It would seem that God's covenant with Abraham's ancestors no longer exists in the way God envisioned.

Interesting about all this to me is that what makes the God of the Old Testament so unique, so fresh and new from all the other gods in the region – like the gods of the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, etc. – is that this God, the God of Abraham, is a God active in history! The people whose stories we are reading this fall from the Old Testament, they knew this, they believed this with all their hearts. Their God – Yahweh, El Shaddai, Elohim – their God made a difference in the world around them. This God was not a stone figure to whom prayers were offered and gifts presented. This God was in the middle of the people, traveling with the people, acting in history for the benefit of his people all the time. Even when they were defeated in battle, God stayed by their side. This was an active God whose presence in the midst of the people never wavered. The world had never seen a God like this before. And it still hasn't.

But the world has seen the people of this God fall away from the most basic element of their part of the covenant. God is quite clear, quite specific in stating God's expectations of Abraham's multitudes: "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." Walk before me and be blameless. Well, that piece gets routinely ignored, doesn't it? And therein lies our challenge as the people of God in our own time and place. How is it that we

can respond to this ancient covenant *which still includes us*. Yes, *we* are part of the multitude of ancestors of Abraham! We forget that, sometimes as Christians, because we focus on the new covenant made possible by and through Jesus Christ. It could be argued, and often is, that this old Abrahamic covenant no longer applies to us as Christians because of Jesus. We think that we Christians just need to focus on Jesus and trying to figure out what would Jesus do in any given situation. That's true as far as it goes but it doesn't go far enough. Like it or not, we are part of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham because as Christians we are his descendants. *We are still bound* by this ancient covenant asking that we walk with God and be blameless.

Well, we think, how in the heck can we do that? What does it even mean, to be blameless? Yes, indeed. What does that mean in this day and age where so many of our societal norms feel like they are under attack from all sides in the rancorous political debates dividing our beloved country. We hardly know what constitutes good manners any more never mind worrying about such a gigantic task as being blameless, for heavens sake! So, now what? Well, that at least is easy to answer. The church is now what. *This* church is now what. This church and all it does for its members and friends within the church and within the community and even the broader world – this is how we start to ponder what it means to walk blamelessly with God. Of course,

we know that's not possible. That's what Jesus came to remind us of, teach us about; but, and this is important, not excuse us from. We are still to strive for walking blameless with God even though we know at the outset we will fall short. The church is how we learn to do it. The church is where we practice it together. The church is where we come to commiserate when we fall short. The church is where we come to learn what it means to live out the ancient covenants of the Bible in all their intricacies and nuances. The church is where we come to walk with God, if not blamelessly then at least doing the best we can.

Our church is a special church, a unique configuration of the family of God coming together in this incredible sanctuary and building. We are a small church doing amazing things in our community, truly living out our commitment to be a beacon of hope in the world. As Stewardship Season begins this week, I hope you will take the time to pray for our church and all of her people, past, present and future. I hope you will consider the covenant each of has with God and each other in this church and give thanks for it in every way you can. Most of all, I hope you will take a moment one dark night to look at all those stars in the sky as you remember God's ancient promise to Abraham, marveling as you do that *you*, with all your faults and foibles and shortcomings, *you* are part of the future God envisioned in that promise. Now isn't that something? Amen.



