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Bridge Street United Church
October 27, 2024
Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:21-31

Thinking About A New Covenant

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” [Jeremiah 31:31]. A new covenant. A covenant to replace the covenant God had made with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, the covenant symbolized by the Ten Commandments.

“Covenant” is not a word we use much these days. The word “covenant,” in our society, speaks of a relationship, usually between two parties. The parties are not necessarily equals, but in a covenant each party makes one or more promises to the other. Marriage is the one place where we might hear the term most frequently. There are still references in the wording of many marriage services to the “covenant of marriage.” Certainly marriage is one of the places where two parties, two individuals in this case, make promises to one another about how they intend to try to live in that relationship in the days that lie ahead. The term “covenant” is also still used in some legal procedures.

But in the ancient Mediterranean world, covenant was a term in much more common use. Among other things, it stood as a general equivalent for the way we might now use the word “treaty.” In such a covenant between two nations, and in those cases one nation was usually more powerful than the other, the covenant specified the promises and obligations each nation was making to the other.

The concept of “covenant” appears with frequency in the Biblical story. God made a covenant with Noah, after the flood. God also make a covenant with Abraham. More directly related to today’s reading from Jeremiah, God had made a covenant with the people of Israel after they escaped from Egypt. God promised the people of Israel blessing and protection in return for their obedience, and one key aspect of that covenant was the Ten Commandments. The failure of the people to maintain their obligations under that covenant was perceived to have led to the earlier destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrian Empire and now to the imminent destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonian Empire.

In today’s reading, God promises to make a new covenant with both the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will be a covenant written “on their hearts,” not on tablets of stone. A feature of the new covenant is that each person will know God. What is most significant about this new covenant is the move away from a “rewards and punishments” approach that marked the covenant God had established with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, a covenant that over the years had come to be seen in a narrower and increasingly legalistic way. It had come to be seen in terms of dos and don’ts, where fulfilling the letter of the law had become more important than the spirit or the intention of the law. This new covenant was a chance to begin anew, with God forgiving them and ceasing to remember their past failures. Though the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem was imminent, this new covenant promised a new beginning in their relationship with God. It is in that new beginning, which will start when the people are in exile in Babylon, that what we know as contemporary Judaism is born. And forgiveness, divine forgiveness, is a key part of that covenant.

That understanding of covenant has been passed on to Christianity through Judaism. I want to make clear that when I say we understand God to have a covenant relationship with us as Christians, I am not in any way suggesting that God has done that in place of the covenant

relationship God has with Jews, the covenant relationship about which Jeremiah was writing. I make that point because some Christians have seen Christianity as taking over that special relationship with God, superseding that relationship that God had established with the Jews. I do not ascribe to that view, nor does the United Church. Rather, we should understand God having such a relationship with both our faith traditions.

I have chosen to provide this background about covenant because today is Reformation Sunday. It is a Sunday during the year when we remember our history, a history shaped by the events of the 16th century in western Europe. In the early 16th century, there were a number of figures calling for a reform of the church of their day. Some of those individuals wound up leaving the church of their day as a means of bringing about the reform they thought necessary. Other individuals, equally troubled by what they saw as abuses in the church of that day, and equally committed to reform, chose to stay in the church and work to reform it from within.

To many of those reformers who left the church and helped to found some of the Protestant denominations we now know, including the denominations that came together in 1925 to form The United Church of Canada, the concept of a covenant relationship with God was very important. Today's reading from Jeremiah was a significant passage in how these reformers thought about the concept of covenant. I want to note three features of that covenant described in Jeremiah, chapter 31, features that were important to those 16th century reformers and that have had an important part in Protestantism since the Reformation.

One of the features of that covenant described in Jeremiah was that they "would all know me ["me" in this phrase meaning "God"], from the least of them to the greatest." At the time of the Reformation, there was a conviction that the average person did not have access to God. One needed a mediator; the church, more particularly its clergy, functioned as such a mediator. While in our tradition ministers have an important role to play, being the mediator between any one of

you and God is not one of those roles. Each of us has the same access to God. No one has greater status, or greater access, than another. Each of us has the capacity to pray. Each of us has the capacity to read Scripture and to ponder it.

A second point. In this text from Jeremiah, God talks about writing the covenant on their hearts. I think that imagery captures both the sense to which I just referred, namely, that each of us has access to God, and the sense that we are able to come to know God. In our denominational tradition, we see Scripture as a key means through which God can speak to us. That is a concept that goes back to the Reformation, and the notion that each of us has access to God, in our case through the Biblical stories and teachings, is one that I think also reflects the idea in this passage from Jeremiah of God putting “my law within them,” or having access to God.

We are certainly a denomination that sees Scripture as important for our lives. We speak of it as foundational, or as a primary authority, for our theological understandings, our understandings of what we believe. That said, I think at some point in the past we began to see Scripture more as a list of do’s and don’ts. Our ancestors in the faith saw this book as a liberating text. I remember being startled the first time I read in a theology text book in my student days that the Bible was a liberating book, or, to be more correct, a book that contained a liberating Word. That was not how I thought about Scripture at the time. It had become more that dos/don’ts list to which I referred. But it is, indeed, a book with a liberating Word. It is a story of God’s gracious acts, a collection of narratives, letters, law, wisdom, a collection that enables you and me to see these texts as a means through which God can and does still speak. It is a Living Word. It is a story in light of which I can reflect on my life, my story.

You will have noticed that at the end of the readings from Scripture at each worship service, I say “May the words we have heard become God’s word, to us and for us, this day.” I say that because of my conviction that as we hear the words of Scripture read, and we reflect upon

them, we are able to hear God's word come to us through the words of Scripture. The words of Scripture, in and of themselves, are not God's word in a literal sense, but God's word does come to us through the words of Scripture. In that very sense it is indeed a liberating book, for it gives me a story different from the story of our contemporary society. The story I get from our contemporary society is that I am valued only for what I do, what I accomplish, or what I have accomplished. In that different story from Scripture there is a word of grace, a word of being valued not because of anything I have, or might accomplish, but of being valued because I am. It is a word of grace, and of love.

A third point. There is another angle to the concept in the new covenant that everyone would know God. I made the point before about the equality of every person in this regard. No one is greater or lesser. No one needs a mediator.

But knowing God also means affirming God as the God whom one seeks to serve. One of the changes that some of the leaders of the Reformation brought was a different understanding of what it meant to live a Christian life. The Church of the medieval period looked at the demands of living a Christian life and concluded that it was impossible for most people to do so. So, those who would truly be holy, those who would truly live a Christian life, would join one of the religious orders of the day, either a male one or a female one. Only in such a monastic setting, apart from the cares of ordinary life, could one hope to achieve a life holy and dedicated to God.

But the various reformers, and particularly those of the Reformed tradition in which we stand, believed that such a distinction was a false one. They believed that every Christian was called to the same standard, and many of those reformers set the bar high. They introduced the concept of a disciplined life as the responsibility of every Christian. Our salvation was the result of God's grace, not our activities. However, they reasoned that we were each given particular gifts and called to exercise those gifts in God's service. All vocations were equally honorable and

important, but one was to use one's gifts in God's service as best one could. It was a highly disciplined life, a life that eschewed anything that was not seen as serving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Knowing God, in the passage from Jeremiah, meant living one's life seeking the things that reflected what God was understood to desire, justice, for example, in the words of many of the Old Testament prophets, prophets like Jeremiah or Amos. I think the concept of those Protestant reformers, the concept of a disciplined life, a life lived with intentionality, a life where we attempt to have the way we live reflect the faith we profess, is a concept it would be good to regain. When we say the United Church creed, with its lines about living with respect in creation, about seeking justice and resisting evil, those things need to mean something. In that principle from the tradition in which we stand, we also, I think, pick up something that was being emphasized in those words from Jeremiah.

On this Reformation Sunday, may we open ourselves yet again to the God who meets us in the stories of Scripture, in the tradition in which we stand, and in the examples we see of faithful living, both in the past and in the present. I believe we meet God in all those ways. And to that God, who made us and who loves us, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with

Resources

Brueggemann, Walter. *Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1998.

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