

JESUS' JOURNEY AS A FAITHFUL JEW
"Jesus' Heart Covenant & Ours"
March 21, 2021; 9:00 am
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

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33 But *this* is the **covenant** that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my Way, my Torah, within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

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I. COVENANT UNPACKED

If you were to "take it to the streets"—take a microphone out or a phone with a recorder (Matthew!) and walk the streets of say, New York or Denver, Buena

Vista or Salida, and ask the million dollar question, "What's a Covenant?" What do you think you'd get for an answer? Before or after the blank stares!

It may well be one of those biblical and historical, yet also contemporary words that we toss out into the air, tussle around and over, quite a lot these days, but never really stop to think what we're saying. We have "covenant agreements" between congregations and pastors; the UCC considers itself a "covenantal body" between all its congregations and various regional and national agencies.

We talk of "covenantal norms" or "behavioral covenants" between members in congregations, communities and organizations. But, do we really know what the word—or even just the concept—means? Or where it came from?

You might see the words: "A Covenanted Community" on a big gate in a subdivision. I would guess that's one of the most *common* places we see it nowadays. Maybe even more than in churches!

We structure ourselves, in some spaces and places, into "Covenanted Communities," run by HOA's with a board of directors, to protect and preserve what's important to us. Especially in our neighborhoods, but it might be in our wider communities and organizations too.

We do this "For better or for worse." For better—because as humans living together on this shared

planet, we desire structure and guidelines that help us to be better neighbors; to look out for one another and to best guard and care for the environment where we reside. Agreed-upon covenants help us to do just that. To be good neighbors.

It can also be “For worse,” because, those very same desires and how to live out our shared values may end up *clashing* at times, and the differing perspectives can lead to dissension and *exclusion* of some—some folks or some varying ideas—intentionally or inadvertently.

And that is *certainly* nothing new! What I’ve just described is very much what was happening in ancient Israel—throughout much of the Bible—Old Testament through to the New and beyond—and has happened among humans since the dawn of time. Covenants can be inclusive or exclusive; grace-filled or rule-heavy; invitational or tribal and elitist.

So, what is a Covenant, in our faith tradition, and why are they needed and important?

Way back—starting with the covenants God made with Noah, then later, Abraham; Moses and the covenant for the Children of Israel given at Mt. Sinai, and down through the ages. Then on to Jesus being understood by Christians as representing a “New Covenant,” and then through to today, when—whether we realize it or not—we engage in “covenantal agreements” all over the place!

A little project for you after this message: Pay attention to Covenant. Endeavor to notice how and where you see or hear the word. In church, scripture, the news, daily life, your neighborhood. Ask yourself: What does Covenant *mean* in this instance? What is meant by the use of that term or that title: “Covenanted” or “Covenantal?” Who are the players? Who is invited into the covenant? What are the stipulations? The requirements? What does “signing on the dotted line” commit one to?

II. A KIND OF RELATIONSHIP

In a nutshell, a Covenant is *a kind of relationship*.

It’s the *kind* of relationship that our God—the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and all his family, along with so many families of faith down through the ages—including the families of Judaism and Islam—desires to have with God’s people. Pure and simple.

A covenant is a *mutual* agreement, made *in agreement* and with thoughtful consideration—not in the spur of the moment. It’s not a list of rules and regulations, but a group of guidelines and promises of how we’re going to live and move in life together. Where relationship is valued *over* rules and stipulations. It’s *not* a contract.

It’s not even just made with 2-legged, human creatures! When God made the covenant with Noah after the flood, symbolized by a beautiful rainbow in the sky, it was a promise to *all* the creatures of the

earth, all the living things that dwelt therein, that never again would a flood cover the whole world. That all of creation was beloved and treasured and protected by the Creator.

Covenants are *built* on promises made by all parties—even if those parties can't all pick up a pen or an iPad and write things down! These promises or commitments form the foundation of a relationship, and a plan for living in community together—now and hopefully, evermore.

III. JEREMIAH'S COVENANT CONTEXT

Jeremiah, one of the Prophets of Israel, in the time of the exile, is writing to give the people hope—yet also challenging them to get on a more faithful path and stay there.

He is recalling for the children of Israel how their God—Yahweh—has shown gracious favor and patience, over and over, and even salvation itself—as he brought them out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. How, on that journey, he'd formed them into a People—his precious People—when they had no place or family of belonging before.

Jeremiah reminds his hearers of how God had brought them out and given them life and freedom and sustained them, “and of their obligation to respond to their God in complete loyalty, trust, and obedience; and repeatedly he charged them with failure in this regard.” (John Bright)

He warns them that their unfaithfulness would lead to consequences and a change of fate.

And, with that warning, comes a promise. A prophecy of great hope! They will be brought out of exile, brought back home, and brought back into renewed, covenantal relationship with God—because God never gives up on them—no matter what life might look like around them right now.

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IV. NOW AND NOT YET

Jeremiah's prophesied "New Covenant" has not yet "come to pass." And it may never come to complete fulfillment—but that's not what matters. What matters here, in this chapter of Israelite history, prophesied by the "weeping, yet hopeful prophet" Jeremiah, is what we glimpse of God. What we can cling to and testify about—throughout the long ages past and present—is the tenacity of this awesome God.

The patience, persistence and perseverance our God demonstrates—like an unconditionally loving parent whose children stray and disobey over and over and over again. Yet, the Loving Mother/Father keeps gathering them in, wrapping arms around and saying, "Okay. That didn't work.

I tried to convey the right way to walk this way, and you stepped off the path. I tried coming at it from a different angle and laid out some logical consequences, even gave you gold stars on the chore chart and some Reward Categories like extra screen time and a land flowing with milk and honey, but still you broke the covenant.

So! Here it is, again, conveyed another way. This time I'm going to make sure it's clear and it sticks! My Guidelines are going to be written, yes—etched, inscribed, drawn in permanent sharpie marker—right on your hearts!

What do we learn about God in all this? What do we learn about ourselves as messy, always-messing-up

human beings? That covenantal love is an enduring love. It's never replaced or superseded. It just keeps growing, evolving, expanding and reaching out and pulling in.

V. JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN

Christian teaching understands Jesus as the fulfillment of the new covenant. Yet, even that doesn't mean "one and done." It's for us all to "live into." Some would say the new covenant will only be fulfilled with Jesus' second coming. Some say it's always happening now, and is always our ongoing endeavor, with God, to fulfill.

Jews understand the new covenant—envisioned by Jeremiah and reminded of over the eons—to be always in process. We're all still working on it! It's a growing edge.

Fulfillment, for now, is only partial. If it were fulfilled for both Judaism and Christianity, the Kingdom would be here. We are in the "Now and not yet." We are still in a stage of becoming. To truly live and act as if God's Guidestones are engraved on our hearts—that's a worthy goal for both traditions.

For we don't always act and live like all the guidance God can give is fully etched on our hearts. We still need a teacher—divine and scriptural—and need reminders. We need to keep coming back to remind ourselves that Jesus is written on our hearts.

Every time we gather in Jesus' name we remind

ourselves of who and Whose we are—the Body of Christ. The followers of the Way. The particular people whose new covenant is fulfilled in Christ becoming flesh and dwelling among us—in our hearts.

We also might need a “new method of transmission” like the Israelites did. No longer etched on stone tablets, imparted from without, Yahweh says, I’m going to inscribe this one from within—put it right inside of you—since I made you, after all!

The Covenant itself is not “new”; not changing—the **method of transmission** is! God doesn’t change. Covenant doesn’t change. People change—in their reception of it.

Think of taking a dusty Bible down off the shelf—perhaps forgotten, not read much over the years and putting scripture onto a phone app or to music, so a follower engages, listens, basks in it and it becomes a part of them.

Or, perhaps a fresh look at a worn-out notion that God and faith are found only Sundays in church! This COVID pandemic year has made us take all of that out of the building, our worship sanctuaries, and into our lives, our world, our hours and our days. We’ve taken our “faith into the streets” because we can’t contain it in a building anymore.

VI. WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS

So, what does it mean to have God’s covenant “written on our hearts?” How do we live out our part of the Covenant that God makes with us, continually.

Bruce Epperly ponders:

“What would it be like to have God’s presence as near as our heartbeat? For most of us, there is a gap between God’s vision and our behaviors and attitudes.

Often, it may seem, that God appears as an *external* agent, ready to judge us for our imperfections or as the voice of conscience alerting us when we’ve gone astray, or as a force going against our individual self-interest. Jeremiah promises a different kind of experience – the experience of being in tune with God’s vision of ourselves and our society and having our heart beat in synch with God’s.”

Jesus’ Heart Covenant & Ours

A very early childhood memory I have is of my sister Nancy, almost 6 years older, who slept in a bunk-bed above me, teaching me a song to go to sleep by.

*Into my heart, into my heart,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus;
Come in today, come in to stay,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.*

That song is written on my heart.

I probably wasn't even old enough to read when she taught it to me.

But I never needed to see the words on a page, or the notes on a music staff. I didn't need to know what key it was in; if it was in a hymnal or a camp song book; whether it was spiritual sung by slaves around the campfire or monks in a cathedral in Europe.

It was in my heart, and I knew from a pre-literate age that Jesus, who loved me, was there too.

Let us pray as we close, the prayer we began with today:

Closing Prayer

(based on Jeremiah 31: 31-34)

O God of our Hearts

You yearn to be so close to us
that we can know you in every breath,
in every hope, in every relationship.

Meet us here today and
teach us to recognize
the covenant of justice, peace and love
you have written on our hearts.

So may our desires become your desires,
our work become your work,
and our community
the place where you are sought and found.
In your many names and claiming your loving promises,
we pray, Amen.

On this week of remembering St. Patrick's deep commitment to Christ and sharing Christ's heart and love with neighbor and stranger alike, we sing his Breastplate Prayer, put to a familiar tune, composed by a Muslim named Yusuf Islam. You might know him as Cat Stevens.

Let us sing, Christ Beside Me, #425 in our CUCC hymnal.

(Prayer at closing taken from "*O God of Our Hearts: Prayers for the Fifth Sunday in Lent*," written by Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey and the Rev. Susan A. Blain.)