

(Dear Friends, I hope you are well.

Usually, you get the cake and not the recipe. Below are the complete set of sermon notes, from which, mercifully, a pithier version was proclaimed. I preached sans manuscript. Stepped down front and spoke from the heart and mind on our main floor level.

Started with God's desire for communion with us, and walked us through the Word from Genesis 1 (Creation) to Gen. 12 (Covenant/Promise) to Jeremiah 31 (New Covenant/Promise). Stayed with the Hebrew people in Babylonian exile for a while, before moving into Jeremiah's prophecy/deliverance of a new covenant. Then brought it forward to Christ at Passover, where the ultimate prophecy/deliverance of a new covenant was made real. Quit preaching and got to meddling by unpacking some of the more challenging dimensions of covenant and our communal relationships with God and one another.

And then I did it again at Campbell Stone retirement home at 5 PM. Shalom, James)

Worship/Sermon Series for Autumn 2019
Disciples: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together
Based on the book by Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn (CBP, 2019)

“Our Covenant of Mutual Accountability”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 22, 2019
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Genesis 12: 1-4; Jeremiah 31: 29-34; Luke 22: 14-22

Genesis 12:1-4 (NRSV)

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and

I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Luke 22:14-20 (NRSV)

¹⁴ When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶ for I tell you, I will not eat it^[a] until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸ for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

¹⁹ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

SERMON NOTES

Here, now, in the context of worship,
in the midst of a blessed community of faith,
in the safety of such sacred space
we are exploring, examining, evaluating
our identity as disciples of the Living God.

This is a good thing to do periodically,
to pause, catch our breath, contemplate who we are and Whose we are.

We're not the first to do so.
Far from it.
Consider first the meaning of covenant, and what it means to the faith.

TEACHING ON COVENANT

A covenant, as witnessed in the Holy Bible and experienced in our day-to-day lives
has both horizontal and vertical dimensions.

Vertical: connecting God and humanity, communion made manifest,
Christ come to earth from heaven and showing us the way,
a Savior serving, sacrificing, sent to hold us accountable.

Horizontal: God's love at work in us to build and become the Beloved Community,
connecting us with each other,
holding us, beholding us, keeping us accountable to each other.

The Word teaches us that a covenant invokes a commitment to serve together,
because this is the will of God for us to be and do and share.

We sing of this covenant when we lift our voices in song:

*“We will work with each other, we will work side by side;
We will work with each other, we will work side by side;
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride.
And they will know we are Christians by our love.”*

Scriptures teach that a covenant forms us into a viable community,
a fellowship that affirms diversity, plurality, rejecting uniformity,
welcoming, respecting, recognizing
varieties of perspectives and ideas and interpretations.

Churches and Christian faith communities are yoked by covenant;
we are connected by a covenant of love.

Whether we differ in creed or understanding or practice or form,
in Christ, we are still one,
bound together in a covenant of love,
a love that's bigger and grander than we dare to imagine.

Reminds me of the cartoon that shows the Pearly Gates of Heaven.
There are two doors at the Gate.

Above one door is a sign that says, “Right Religion,”
above the other is a sign that says, “Wrong Religion”
and folks walking through either gate
are being welcomed into the presence of God, forever and ever.

The same is true for Christians within faith communities and churches.
To be in covenant means that we stay at table, for we have covenanted to agree to differ.

We stay, seated beside and serving one another,
whether at the Lord's Table or a fellowship hall table,
a meeting room table or the metaphorical communal table.

We stay, even and especially when it is difficult to do so.

We stay, even and especially when we differ.

We stay, even and especially when we think or feel like we'd rather not.

To be in a holy covenant means that when we disappoint one another,
we will see one another through the challenge of being human.

At some point and time, I will disappoint you;
and we will disappoint one another, I guarantee it.

When we get discouraged or disillusioned or down,
when a speed bump difference looks like Mt. Everest,
being in covenant means that we've already made the commitment
we will see one another through to the other side.

And on the other side of the speed bumps and mountains we make of disappointments
is a sacred place called reconciliation,
which is where the magic happens.

This is the beauty of a sacred, God-based covenant.

A covenant is not a contract.

Contracts are based on “*if/then.*”

If you do this for me,
then I will do that for you.

A holy covenant is based on “*because/therefore.*”

Because God in Christ loves you and you and you,
therefore in Christ we are forgiven and freed from self-centeredness,
liberated to love our neighbors.

Because baptism is an outward expression of an inner conviction & commitment,
therefore we are empowered by the Spirit to embody love and compassion.

Because Jesus Christ invites you to dine with Him at a supper given in His honor,
therefore you are welcome to partake, to be filled,
to serve one another as Christ first served us.

Covenant means freedom.

Simply, thankfully because God is Lord of All,
the Church of Jesus Christ is free from external control;
our covenant affirms that we answer to God, and only to God.

At the same time, with such ecclesial freedom
comes great responsibility, significant mutual accountability.

God holds the Church accountable
to follow the teachings and embody the grace of Christ.

Because of this covenant,
we are, *therefore*, to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry,
tend to the sick and suffering,
be a catalyst for justice,
speak truth to power,
love one another.

BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

We trust, we know God as a Creative Being, as the Creator who,
over eons and in God’s own timing and temperament,
like a potter, scooped up some clay and formed cells with consciousness,
and crafted a humanity.

The breath of God made life, making something out of something,
and then declared us good.

Yet, making, creating, breathing goodness and life into humanity
was not enough.

The Creator sought communion, to be at table with loved ones.

In the beginning, from the very beginning

God sought a relationship, a loving relationship,
a covenantal relationship with the original blessings God made.

When humans first wandered and strayed from our Creator,
we trust, we intuit, we imagine that God was discouraged and disappointed.

So, the Lord approached a nomadic family headed by Abram and Sarai,
and made a covenant with them,

Now the Lord said to Abram,

*“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house
to the land that I will show you.*

*² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.*

*³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse;
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...” Genesis 12:1-4a

We trust, we know the value of a relationship with our Creator.

Like Abram, we can appreciate the lure of such a covenant.

The Lord offered to Abram and Sarai and all of their descendants – that’s us, too --
a relational covenant.

God made a covenant with humanity

one based on the promise of land,
the promise of progeny,
and the promise of divine presence.

As you know, as promised,

God lead the descendants of Abram and Sarai into the land of Canaan,
which in time was divided by lot
amongst the 12 tribes of Israel;
the northern areas were called Israel; the southern Judah.

We trust, we know that in due time
the whole people of God in the land of Judah
became discouraged and disappointed.

Their loss was real, and it hurt.

They wept and mourned, grieved and expressed in laments their pain over their losses.

Many psalms and lamentations that we have in the Scriptures
were poured out by the people of Judah.

Out of the midst of their grief and suffering the people of Judah cry out, saying,

Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her? (Jer. 8:19)

Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come! (Jer. 17:15)

They weep out of their deep sense of loss.

They wail for what they once had, for what is now no more,
for what they deeply suspect will never be again.

They have lost much in a short period of time.

Lost to death is a beloved shepherd in King Josiah (2 Kings 23:29);

lost in exile is the Davidic line of the monarchy in King Jehoiachin's

via imprisonment and banishment (2 Kings 24:12; Jer. 29:1-2);

lost from their community is the sense of peace and security

which are threatened and about to be snatched

by the marauding Babylonian armies of the north

(Jer. 1:14; 5:15-17).

Further, they fear being disconnected and forcibly removed

from the lands and fields of their ancestors,

land which their Creator, the Lord of Hosts,

promised and gave to them (Genesis 12:1-9; Exodus 23:31).

Jerusalem remembers,

in all the days of her affliction and wandering,

all the precious things that were hers in days of old.

When her people fell into the hand of the foe,

and there was no one to help her,

the foe looked on mocking over her downfall. (Lamentations 1:7)

Finally, they grieve because when they need God the most Yahweh is silent.

They see the temple in tatters,

the land under siege,

the crops dying from drought, sword and pestilence (Jer. 14:13-16),

and they wonder aloud, "Where are you, God?"

They are experiencing separation from the presence of God.

It's as if God had given up the search for them

as a shepherd might finally give up the looking for a wayward sheep.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest. (Psalm 22:1-2)

Like the Psalmists weeping in the night feeling distant from God in the midst of anguish, so too do the Judeans weep and moan for the salvation of God.

The enemy is strong and hope for deliverance seems farfetched at best.

Look! He comes up like clouds,

his chariots like the whirlwind,

his horses are swifter than eagles --

*woe to us, for we are ruined.
The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved. (Jer. 4:13, 8:20)*

Impatient, convoluted, unsettled, uncertain,
the Judeans think they are not god-like when torn asunder by such grief. Jeremiah points out their denial, but his message is ignored (4:11-31). Consequently they deny God what God most requires: undiluted, absolute devotion and allegiance. They turn to the divine idols, images either self-made or imported by their neighbors and from neighboring nations.

It is into this context that Yahweh's presence is very clearly made known to the people of Judah. Jeremiah reports that the Lord says,

*Why have they provoked me to anger
with their images and their foreign idols? (Jer. 8:19)*

Where is God?

God is here.

God speaks to Jeremiah and through Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-10),

a resonating reminder to the people of Judah of the presence of Yahweh,

even if silent (Jer. 17:15, 17),

even if angry (Jer. 8:19; 17:5-6, 11),

even if choosing to use another people

as instruments for social change, justice, human transformation

or simply to right old wrongs (Jer. 50 and 51).

The Lord desires homecoming for Israel, "the tribe of his inheritance." (Jer. 51:19)

This speaks to what Abraham Heshel labels the theology of the pathos of God.

(The Prophets, Vol II, 1962.)

At the intersection of faithfulness in the relationship between God

and the whole people of God

there is met healing and hope.

God's passion is for communion with creation.

The invitation to communion is spoken from the heart

of God's own pain and anguish for Yahweh's wayward children.

"The grief of Jeremiah and of God permit newness for newness comes out of grief articulated and embraced." (Brueggemann, Hopeful Imagination, Fortress Press, P. 86)

The corrective for the disconnect of the people from the spiritual reality in which they exist is too deep and wide to be treated with balm from Gilead.

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? (Jer. 8:22)

No doctor can cure what is wrong with Judah.
Only a turning away from sin and false worship
 will suffice to treat her broken and wounded souls.
Hope will take root and the restorative healing begin after -- and only after --
 the people of God recognize and acknowledge their current reality.
This may be called relinquishing ones hold on falseness and lies
 in order to accept the new life God offers and provides.
The presence of the voice of Jeremiah beckons to Judah
 to maneuver herself out of denial and into acceptance,
 to come out of the darkness of despair
 and into the light of hope.
Prophets in our midst speak of hope as a reality,
 and our souls are born anew, from above (Greek "anothen")
 when their words touch the core of our being.

Suddenly the suffering is bearable,
 and tomorrow's dawn seems that much closer.
 *And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats — or talk about the
threats that were out. Or what would happen to me from some of our sick white
brothers. Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it
really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. I won't mind.
Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not
concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the
mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you,
but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land.
So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine
eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord.*
(The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from his last speech, April 3, 1968.)

*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....
But this is the covenant that I will make
 with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord;
I will put my law within them,
 and I will write it on their hearts;
 and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:31, 33)*

Jeremiah prepares his people for a new reality.
He prepares his people for a relationship with a deity
 who dwells within them,
 in the midst of them. (Psalm 40:8; Jer. 24:7; 30:32; 31:38-40)
No longer are the people of Yahweh tied to land (Exodus 23)
 or to the past of their ancestors (31:29).
God liberates the wounded and grieving exiles
 of their painful past
 and presents a new future,
 one with the hope of presence.

The presence of God is now known in their hearts,
 and their hearts are branded with the mark of God's love.
The faithful demonstrate their knowledge of God
 by doing justice ("*mishpat*") and righteousness ("*tsedaqah*"). (Jer. 23:6, Isaiah 11:5)

The voice of Jeremiah calls the exiles to a new future,
 a spiritual dwelling place in the midst of God,
 blessed by a new covenant. (Hebrews 8:8; Jer. 32:40; 33:14; Deut 1:32)

The new covenant will be different because it will be a covenant of presence,
 one that is scripted by the Deuteronomists
 for a mobile people of faith
 who are connected by community
 more so than land.

It will be a word of blessing, judgement, and forgiveness
 for a counter-culture religion
 that is to survive and thrive on the margins.

They are to envision the new covenant as presence.

The new covenant, the renewing presence of God,
 is transportable, teachable, and memorable.

It is not as much land-based as it is Torah-based.

The new covenant is scripted in the Word of God, and it will not be hidden,
 although it will be counter-culture.

The consequence of being new covenant people
 is always living in the presence of God,
 for there is no escape from God's grace and judgement.

The faithful might still have iniquities
 but God will forgive "and remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:34)

In the presence of God the exiles find not only freedom from sin,
 they also discover freedom from painful histories.

They're free to make new memories,

to sing songs of hope and meaning
to their children and their children's children,
and to experience relief from their grief.

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Rather than deny our self the reality of grief
in a vain and futile effort to avoid suffering and loss,
we might be better served
by relinquishing our pain and anguish to God,
who cries and wails with us
just as Yahweh wept with the people of Jerusalem
(and as Jesus wept over it).

We live in the margins,
and it is on the margins of culture
we encounter the presence of Christ.

May we accept exile as a gift,
as a strength, as a divine blessing
bestowed upon exilic communities of faith.

May we receive exile
as an opportunity to be healed, restored, forgiven, regrouped,
and recipients of God's amazing presence.

*After Rose's husband walked out and left her for another woman,
the suddenly single mother of two preschool-age children
found herself living in despair.*

She asked a friend at church, "How do I get through what is going on?"

She answered by quoting from Jeremiah 29:

*"I will fulfill to you my promise...
For surely, I know the [dreams] I have for you, says the Lord,
[dreams] for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope."*

*Afterward, as Rose dried her hair each morning,
letting the hot waves of air caress her hair and calm her soul,
she memorized a line of scripture
and hoped for a future.*

*Today when Rose reflects on her life,
she testifies all Christ has done for her.*

*"He gave me a future with hope when I had neither," she says,
"and He let me find Him when I needed Him most."*

*God's good will for her welfare
has come to pass,*

and she is grateful.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!