

“Covenant Faithfulness”

Genesis 17.1–7

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 5 March 2006

Today, Plymouth (will receive) (received) 18 new covenanted members, so it’s wonderful that the story of Abraham’s covenant with God appears in today’s lectionary reading. Covenant is an important term in Judaism and Christianity, and it is even more critical in churches such as ours, which are non-hierarchical. It is covenant, rather than property ownership or episcopal authority, that holds UCC congregations together.

So, what exactly is a covenant? Here is what the Anchor Bible Dictionary says: “A ‘covenant’ is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from performing certain actions stipulated in advance.”¹ So, it sounds kind of like a treaty, and sometimes it is. But, I want to broaden covenant beyond that and explore some of the covenants that affect our lives as persons of faith.



Let’s start with Abram. Did you notice that the moment of covenant is when God gives him a new name: Abraham? That’s a sign of being a new person, in terms of relationship with God. Yahweh makes some promises to Abraham: that he will become a father in old age and that he will be the ancestor of many nations. (There was actually a story about human genetics and ancestry in *Newsweek* recently that shows a genetic marker for all persons who have a Cohen gene that theoretically goes back to ancient Israel and the house of Moses’ brother Aaron...so I guess it confirms God’s covenant!)

This covenant comes as an acknowledgement of Abram’s faithfulness – his *trust* in God. And the sign of the covenant involves circumcision...but that’s later in chapter 17. So, God makes a perpetual bond with Abraham and his descendants forever. (By the way, if anyone wonders if Jews are “saved,” I would ask them to read this chapter of Genesis again...especially the part where God makes an “*everlasting* covenant.”)



Covenant is about relationship. Think of the last wedding you attended: did the couple make binding vows with one another? That’s a covenant that weaves a sense of depth and intention and promise around a couple. Often when I perform a wedding, I also ask all those who are present to enter a covenant with the couple, to support and honor their relationship through both the hard and the easy times. Jean and I lived together for a couple of years before getting married, a move my dad counseled me against...not on the grounds of immorality, but he wisely commented that without a commitment – a covenant – it’s too easy to bail out when the going gets tough.

Covenant is about security. Even before the formal covenant, Abram had been strengthened by the knowledge that God was behind him. How else could he have uprooted his family and moved them across what we know as the Middle East? Abram felt sure that God was supporting him and gave him the security to do scary-crazy things (like having children in his 90s).

Covenant is about belonging. The German Reformed tradition of the UCC used the Heidelberg Catechism in instructing its young people, and its first question and answer is “*What is your only comfort in life and death?* That I am not my own, but belong with body

¹ David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. (NY: Doubleday, 1992), v. I, p. 1179.

and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” So, as individual Christians we can claim that even our lives are not our own, but rather we belong to Christ through the covenant of baptism.

Back in 1629, the First Church in Salem (which became Unitarian in the 1800s, but still claims Protestantism) came up with a covenant that held them together and is still recited in worship on Sundays (and that some of us will remember from the Pilgrim Hymnal): “We covenant with the Lord and one with another and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.” (You’ll note that even the covenant suggests that God is still speaking through “his blessed word of truth!”) One of the most important distinctions of the Salem Covenant is that it exists as a covenant between three parties: the individual, God, and other members of the congregation.

And this morning, our newest members said, “In the presence of God and these witnesses, I give myself **unreservedly** to God’s service and take this to be my church. Ever mindful of the welfare of my brother and sister members, I promise to walk with them in faithfulness and Christian love. I promise, so far as I am able, to attend the services of this church, observe its sacraments, support its benevolences and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christian people.”

Covenant is about commitment. Some say that the bar for membership at Plymouth is exceedingly low...after all there is no stringent doctrinal statement. But our covenant is a pretty tall order that each member of this church commits to: we give ourselves *unreservedly* to God’s service, *promise* to attend worship as often as able, and support the church financially and help the congregation be fruitful. It’s good to remind ourselves of the covenants we’ve made with each other at Plymouth, even if the Board of Deacons isn’t breathing down your neck if you miss worship on Sunday morning.

If you observe closely, you’ll see the covenant being lived out all around you...through the volunteer hours given...through our spiritual and demographic growth of our congregation...through the dramatic financial commitments to our capital campaign... and through the actions people take on account of their faith in helping others and “bearing each others’ burdens.”

And *Plymouth* has a reciprocal obligation to its members, too. You are entitled to hear a halfway decent sermon, receive the sacraments, and grow in your faith through our outstanding youth and adult ed. programs. You also have the advantage of having two ministers who are on-call for *real emergencies* 24-7-365. And as Sharon and I have been saying, we still make house calls if you need us. And you can expect to be ministered to by your fellow members.

One of the things that was striking to me when I arrived at Plymouth was the significant number of people who are active at Plymouth – attending worship, sometimes volunteering, sometimes even pledging financial support – but who never have entered a covenant with the church. One of our members told me that it’s “like living together instead of getting married.” I know that some folks are just not “joiners,” and I want to assure you that you are always welcome here. (Though if you need a little push, we would love to have you join anytime!)

Sharon and I not only spend time caring for our members’ spiritual wellbeing, but also that of nonmembers. This afternoon, I’ll be doing a funeral for someone Dick Einerson, Sharon, and I have visited in the hospital for a couple of years, and he wasn’t a covenanted member. It’s just something we do when we’re able, even outside our church covenant.

I’m beginning to set up a support system for an inmate who will be released in May or June. You may have heard me talk about him: his name is James and he saw our “God Is

Still Speaking” TV ad while incarcerated, and phoned me to ask if we really do welcome everyone. Again, James is not a member...yet.

Covenant is about **relationship, security, belonging,** and **commitment.** In our context and in Abraham’s the commitment is to God. Like a marriage, we make promises to encourage one another’s growth and vitality. And like those who entered, the Salem Church Covenant, we bind ourselves to walk together with God and each other.

As we continue our pilgrimage, may we each renew our covenant with God and strengthen the bonds of covenant that weave us together.

May it be so. Amen.