

Trinity United Methodist Church

January 3, 2021

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Joshua 24:14-28 (NIV)

14 “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. **15** But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! **17** It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. **18** And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God.”

19 Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. **20** If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

21 But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the Lord.” **22** Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.” “Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied. **23** “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” **24** And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.”

25 On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. **26** And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord. **27** “See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.” **28** Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own inheritance.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So it is, indeed, the first Sunday in the new year. I was driving the oh-so-long commute that I have to church this morning (for those of you who don't know, the parsonage is right out here on Church Street), but it was still drizzly and so forth, and I thought, "Man, that's another benefit of live streaming." Right? Because in times past, if the weather was bad and you felt like sleeping in or whatever, you had to miss church. But now you get to worship in your jammies. I'm a little jealous of those worshipping at home right now. But anyway, I digress.

In this new year, at this time of year, we typically make New Year's resolutions. I've come to get away from them myself, partly because who in the world actually sticks with their New Year's resolutions? Bunch of overachievers.

But this year I read some ones that were new to me that I rather liked. Maybe you've heard them before. One was, "This year I'm going to help all my friends *gain* ten pounds so that I look skinnier." Your Lunch Bunch can do that, right? Another one was "to read more, so I put subtitles on my TV." Another, "to quit all my bad habits. Then I remembered, nobody likes a quitter." And lastly, "my spouse still hasn't told me what my New Year's resolutions are."

I was actually surprised by some friends this past year. Though COVID-19 has done its best to derail all of our best-laid plans, these friends said that they actually managed to accomplish their resolutions, some of their resolutions at least, thanks to the pandemic. One friend said that she was actually able to read 100 books and even more over the course of the year, thanks to some extra time to do so. Other friends said that they were able to accomplish their resolution of running over 1,000 miles this year. One of them is right here in Smithfield; if you see our Town Manager and Trinity member Michael Stallings, give him a fist bump and a distanced high-five for accomplishing that amazing feat.

The truth is, as I've said, that many of us give up too quickly on our New Year's resolutions for one reason or another, only to recommit to them year after year after year. We might say, "This is the year I'm finally going to lose those extra ten pounds. Only 15 more to go," right? Most of these resolutions are typically good ideas. They're positive goals. They're often health related. But I think maybe part of the trouble with keeping New Year's resolutions going is that they're so often tied to an event or time frame, like New Year's. Or even just next week. How many times have we told ourselves when we're trying to eat more healthy, and then we're out and about and we're rushed,

well, McDonald's is awfully convenient. Or we're tempted with that sugary sweet or whatever it is that we love, and we tell ourselves, "Ahh, I'll start next week on my diet."

It's often true of our spiritual resolutions and faith-based resolutions as well. We might say, "This is the year that I'm going to read through the entire Bible in the year." "This is the time I'm going to get up earlier and pray every morning." "This is the year I'm going to make time for worship weekly with my congregation, whether in person or online." "This is the year I'm going to invite more people to church," maybe. And then when we fall off the wagon, typically—I know I too often do so—we think to ourselves and tell ourselves, "Well, Lent's right around the corner. I'll start then. That's a good time to start." Or we tell ourselves, "Oh, no. I haven't done that 'read through the Bible in a year' plan for weeks. Might as well just give it up and start next year, in 2022."

Am I the only one that tells himself these kinds of things? Well, the thought struck me. Imagine if God thought and acted toward us in the same way. "Well, it's that time again," God might say. "They say down there that it's New Year, some concoction of their own. But I guess it's time to get serious about these hooligans that I created. I guess I should start listening to them a little more, maybe answer a few of their prayers if it's not too inconvenient for me." Of course, God doesn't think and act like that. Despite the times that we might wonder, *where is God?* God doesn't act like that because God is a God of *covenant*.

I introduced this concept of covenant in our Advent and Christmas series because it's central to who we are as people of Christian faith. And I pointed out that there is a difference between contracts and covenants. We're used to dealing, as human beings, in contracts. Especially if we've bought a house or we've gotten a loan or whatever the case might be.

But the differences between contracts and covenants are several. Contracts are made by a rather simple exchange of promises and are ratified by simply signing on the dotted line, so to speak. Whereas covenants are sworn by solemn oaths and are ratified by rituals. We see it early in Genesis, as God first makes his covenant with Abraham. He tells Abraham, "Take all these animals, from the biggest oxen down to the smallest bird, and cut them in half and lay them open on either side." And then God sends a blazing torch to represent him, and it passes through in between these splayed-open carcasses. And to our modern sensibilities we think, "What in the world is that about?" But in ancient times, that is exactly how kings and diplomats would ratify treaties and covenants made between nations and parties. They would do the exact same thing. Lay these animals out, half and half, and they would walk between these carcasses as if to say, "May what was done to these animals be done to me, be done to us, if we don't uphold our end of this covenant." Serious business, covenants are.

Contracts are limited to an exchange of property, usually. “This is mine, that is yours, and we are going to exchange what’s mine and what’s yours for an agreed-upon amount,” and so forth. Whereas covenants involve an exchange of *life*. “I am yours and you are mine.” Contracts are based on profits and self-interest. We put in the contract, “If you don’t do your part, I still get mine.” But covenants call for self-giving loyalty and sacrificial love. “Even if you don’t do your part, I will still do mine.” Contracts are temporary, for a set amount of time (even if it’s a long time, like a 30-year mortgage), whereas covenants are permanent, everlasting, and even multi-generational.

There are blessings for obedience in covenants and curses for disobedience, especially in the sense that covenants seek the good of both parties, the blessing of both parties, how they might bless one another. And so to be disobedient to that covenant invites the lack of goodness, the lack of blessing, and invites even worse actions.

So in short, contracts are really more about *things* and *stuff*, whereas covenants are all about *relationships*.

Rob Renfro is a United Methodist pastor who said in one of his Under Wraps sermons that “if you want to build a house, you sign a contract. But if you want to build a home, you enter into a covenant.”

And we are celebrating still today, on this 10th day of Christmas, that our God is a covenant God who chose to make His home with us in the presence of His Son, Jesus Christ. That the God of Israel is the only near-Eastern God, the only God that claims to be God, who actually chose to covenant Himself with His people. First with Adam and Eve, then with Noah, then with Abraham, then through Moses on Sinai. And in today’s text, Joshua calls the Israelites to recommit to that covenant, especially through Moses on Sinai. “Come back to the law. Come back to God’s ways of being in this world.”

Joshua recounts the saving deeds of the Lord. For God had finally brought them, at last, into the Promised Land. Joshua recounts how he delivered them out of slavery and how God fought all the battles along the way for the people and provided for them along the way. He ends by saying, “So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build. And you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.” In other words, they’ve been given *grace*. But it’s grace that requires a response. For covenant requires commitment. “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness,” Joshua says. “Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves *this day* whom you will serve. Whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of

the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Maybe you’re like us and have that kind of well-known verse on display somewhere in your home. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” But it’s much more than just a plaque on the wall. Because, you see, we’re made in the image of God. And as such, we’re wired for relationships. We *will* covenant ourselves with *something* or *someone*. And if left to our own devices and just going along all willy-nilly, we will default, by our nature, to those lesser gods of pride, of greed, prejudice, holding on to grudges and hatred. And dare I say, nationalism and emperor worship. It’s a choice that we have to make on a daily, even sometimes moment-by-moment basis. *Who will we serve?*

I love the story—I’ve told it many, many times, but I tell it because I love it—of Bishop Pennell, a former Bishop in Virginia, who was speaking at a young adult retreat that I was at a number of years ago. Someone asked him, “When did you decide to follow Jesus?” And he said, “When? The most recent time, or the first time?” And the person said, “Both.” He said, “Well, the first time was as a young preteen at a summer camp that I went to as a youth. The most recent time was this morning, before my feet even hit the floor to get out of bed.” It’s a choice, an intentional choice, to serve the Lord, that we must make.

Because Joshua then speaks of the blessings and curses associated with covenanting with the Lord. This is serious business. We’re entering into relationship with a Deity, with the God of the Universe. He is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He is jealous for us. Any time we go straying elsewhere, God burns with jealousy for us. And in those days, it came out in destruction sometimes, based on their understanding of God at that time. But it’s still true for us today.

It’s like the difference between dating and marriage. There is no coincidence that, at least at a United Methodist wedding, as the couple stands up here at the front, at the beginning I say, “This couple has come to give themselves to one another in this holy *covenant* of marriage.” You see, dating isn’t a commitment. When you’re dating, you can call it off any old time you want to. It still hurts. Feelings get hurt, people get hurt, etc. It’s still not fun, but dating isn’t a lifelong commitment. Marriage is.

So I wonder: Are we dating God? Or are we *covenanted* with God? Because again, God is a God of covenant, and has already chosen to covenant with us. He does so especially through the new covenant, the New Testament, that we have through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It’s what we celebrate every time we pray the prayer of great thanksgiving. Listen closely as we pray that together today, as we recount, like the

scene in Joshua, the ways that God has spoken to us, that God has provided for us, that God has given to us.

You see, resolutions are okay. But they're non-binding. If you don't accomplish your New Year's resolution, if you wind up giving up on it after a period of time—who cares? Right? It's like we're dating our better selves. And if we're honest, it's not even that. It's more like we're flirting with our better selves. "I could look better this year. I could look like that this year. I could be healthier this year. I could have more energy. I could read more. I could get to bed earlier." Things like that. But it's always better if we adopt it as a way of life. A constant in our lives. A *covenant* with ourselves and with each other and with God.

And of course, as in the end of today's reading, there are times and places to remember and to renew the covenants we have made. Such as Shechem, where Joshua sets up a stone. And again, we might think, "Why in the world does he set up a rock? And the rock is going to bear testimony?" Well, how many times do we pass by a place and memories come flooding back to us? "Oh, yeah. That's the church we got married in." "Oh, yeah. That's the church we baptized our children in." "Oh, yeah. That's the cemetery where Dad or Mom or spouse is buried." And we remember, and we renew those covenants in our hearts.

That's what we do every time we celebrate Holy Communion, as well. We have other opportunities in our lives to renew, such as big birthdays that some people are having this week...entering into a new decade of life. Such as the beginning of a new calendar year. Such as the beginning of our Strategic Plan as a church. We've been asking, "What is God's plan for us as a church? Who does God want us to be as a church?"

And as I enter into my 40s this week, as I enter into a new year, that's the question I'm asking myself. *What's God's plan for me? Who does God want me to be?*

These moments of opportunities to renew our covenants is what gave rise in the Methodist tradition to the Covenant Renewal service that John Wesley implemented among the people called Methodists. It usually took place during a watch night New Year's Eve service or a New Year's Day service. And the whole service itself is rather lengthy and very wordy. It's a lot of reading, and every time I look at it I'm reminded—as a kid, we had one pastor who insisted that we do the whole reading of it every single first Sunday in January of the new year. And oh my gosh, it was *BORING*. And so we've condensed it, and the tradition has continued into the Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan tradition. It's a prayer in which we give ourselves to God again in these covenants that we make with Him.

And so these are the things, as I enter into 2021, that I invite you to do with me. *Who is God calling us to be? What is God's plan for us?* If 2020 taught us anything, it's that our best laid plans can go out the window in the drop of a hat, but God is the one who remains constant. And to give ourselves to God in the prayer in the Wesleyan tradition, the Covenant Prayer, each and every day. And if we fall off the wagon, as I know I will, don't put it off—"Ah, I'll pray it every day next year." Pick it up where you left off and pray it again.

Pray with me the traditional version. Let us pray together:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt. Rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee. Exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full; let me be empty. Let me have all things; let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, all glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

So for those of you worshiping at home, feel free to stop by the office any time to pick up one of these cards with the Covenant Prayer. You can also find it online as well—Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition. Pick one of these up and join me in praying this daily as we move forward into 2021 together.