

David C. Myers
January 1, 2012

“Thoughts About Covenants”

Genesis 9:8 – 17

Jeremiah 31:31 – 34

Romans 12:1 – 2

John 15:1 – 10

Introduction of our Covenant with God

Today’s service is quite different that services held in either or Contemporary or Traditional Services. It is a service developed by John Wesley. It was to be held each year on New Year’s Eve, although now several United Methodist Churches use variations of the service on the first Sunday of the New Year.

John Wesley introduced the Covenant of Watch Night Service in this manner:

Dearly beloved, the Christian life, to which we are called, is a life of Christ, redeemed from sin by Him, and through Him consecrated to God. Upon this life we have entered, having been admitted into new Covenant of which Jesus Christ is mediator, and which Christ sealed with His own blood.

On the one side of the Covenant is God’s promise to fulfill in us all that God declared in Jesus Christ. That God’s promise still stands we are sure, for we have known God’s goodness and proved God’s grace in our lives day by day.

On the other side we stand pledged to live no more unto ourselves, but to God who loves us and Christ Who gave Himself for us and calls us to serve Christ.

From time to time we renew our Covenant, especially when we gather at the Table of the Lord; but on this day we meet expressly, as generations have done before us, that we may joyfully and solemnly renew the covenant which bound them and binds us to God.

Let us then, remembering the mercies of God and the hope of God’s calling, examine ourselves by the light of the Spirit, that we may see where we have failed or fallen short in faith and practice and, considering all that this Covenant means, may give ourselves anew to God.

Let us join in the Unison Prayer:

We give thanks to You, O God. you created us; You continually care for us; You have blessed us with love that is everlasting, and given to us Your only Son, Who though rich, for our sake became poor and was tested in every way as we are. He died on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead to show us that new life is always possible.

O God, You call us into a new Covenant with You. Help us, we pray, that we might have clarity and understanding of what it means to be Your people, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(worship service continues with joys and Concerns and Morning Prayer)

Message

The so-called “history” of the Old Testament is a really a story designed to establish that God has a very special place in the lives of the Hebrew people. Almost from the very beginning God has made Covenant with them.

But before we get ahead of ourselves let us be clear what a Covenant is. It is not a contract. A contract is an agreement worked out between two parties. A contract presumes that both sides are equal or at least willingly consent to the agreement. A Covenant, on the other hand means a binding pact between God and God’s people. God initiates the Covenant and stipulates all its provisions. The two parties – in this case God and the people – are not equals. People have the choice of accepting or rejecting the covenant; but are not blessed with the possibilities of offering alternative covenants.

God first made a covenant with Noah after the great flood; and said that the rainbow will be a sign of that Covenant; and that waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

It wasn’t long after that when people wanted to ascend to a level equal with God and set out to build the Tower of Babel.

Then God made a stronger Covenant with Abraham when he called Abraham and his family to leave Ur and the land of the fertile crescent to go to a promised land and to become a Great Nation.

Thus began a history described throughout the Old Testament of Covenant making on God’s behalf and Covenant breaking on humanity’s part. God provided all that humanity needed food, water, beauty; and several rules or Commandments to keep that would ensure that humanity would be able to live in peace and harmony. And people, with our free will, choose to break that covenant – individually and collectively with selfish behavior.

The Great Nation of Israel fell to the Babylonians and the great exile took place with all Israel’s leaders going into captivity and exile in Babylon.

And God came to them again and made Covenant with Jeremiah, saying that the city would be rebuilt. Even Jeremiah bought a plot of land in Israel as a sign of confidence in God’s goodness. This was known as the New Covenant – not unlike the Covenant God made with their ancestors when God took them out of captivity in Egypt. This will be a new Covenant “I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will by their God, and they shall be My people. 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.” (Jeremiah 31:33b – 34)

Alas, the history of the Old Testament is Covenant making on God’s part and Covenant breaking on the people’s part. And we enter a time when the prophet’s rightly reminded the people that they weren’t keeping the Covenant, they were worshipping objects and rules and not God, and they weren’t caring for the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners.

And God came once again. This time through the days we just celebrated at Christmas – God sent His only Son. Jesus was God becoming flesh and living among us.

Jesus healed the sick, brought Good News to the poor, clothed the naked, and changed the attitudes of the people and established a new Covenant. Paul summarizes that Covenant in Romans 12 when he says “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the Will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

Jesus, in poetic language, describes the Covenant in John 15:

John 15:1 – 10

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in Me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from Me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in Me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become My disciples.

As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.

This is the ultimate Covenant presented to us. God will forgive us. God will nourish us – if we keep our Covenant with God.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in 18th century England established a service that built on the tradition of a Watch Night Service – celebrated on New Year’s Eve. In many ways this service reminds us of God’s goodness and all the blessings God provides us. It calls on us to remember that God is in charge; and it calls on us to renew our allegiance to God. It is a very powerful prayer that ought to be disturbing to you. And you shouldn’t pray it without some preparation. So I read from the Watch Night Service these words of prayer and preparation.

THE PREPARATION

And now, beloved, let us bind ourselves with willing bonds to our covenant God, and take the yoke of Christ upon us.

This taking of Christ's yoke upon us means that we are heartily content that Christ appoint us our place and work, and that Christ alone be our reward.

Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honor, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and temporal interests, others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is assuredly given to us in Christ, Who strengthens us.

Being thus prepared, let us now, in sincere dependence on God's grace and trusting in God's promises, yield ourselves anew to God.

O Lord God, Who called us through Christ to be partners in this gracious Covenant; We take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience, and engage ourselves, for love of You, O God, to seek and do Your will. We are no longer our own, but Thine.

Shall we pray together:

Gracious God, I am no longer my own but Yours. Put me to what You will, rank me with whom You will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for You or laid aside for You, exalted for You or brought Low for You.

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 Your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, You are mine, and I am Yours, so be it.

And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.

Offertory Prayer