

Covenant 2018

January 1, 2018 Rev. Cathy Hart

I hope you all had a Merry Christmas. Many may have begun their New Year's resolution lists as we say good bye to 2017 and hello to 2018. For some, this past year was filled with joy – the birth of a grandchild, a wedding (as my son was married this year), - for some it was a year of great loss – Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria impacted so many lives; death of a loved one; illness. It makes us look forward to a new year, a better year. Today, we will be looking at 2018 a little differently. Today, we are remembering our covenant with God. Covenant is a word that is not used by many today. It is an unfamiliar word...a churchy word. As I think back, the first time I heard the word “covenant” was in 1981. I remember this because that is when the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* came out. The plot of the movie centered around the discovery of the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was built as the container for the 10 commandments. It was said to hold the presence and power of God. The ark was carried before many armies, leading them to victory. So for years, I understood “covenant” to be the 10 commandments. But when you read the Old Testament, you will find that there were many covenants. You see, God created humans to be in partnership with him, caring for creation. He has always sought us to be in a relationship with him. But humans are prideful, independent, strong willed and want to do things on their own. So God has worked

for generations, creating covenants with people and nations, in order to restore the partnership. Rather than my going through each one, take a look at this summary of the covenants:

VIDEO

So a covenant is about God's promises and our commitment. It is interesting to me to note the covenant with Noah. Did you notice that God made a promise, but there was no expectation of commitment from the people? God knew that they couldn't keep it. God knows that we too will fail. And yet, He keeps trying to restore our relationship with Him.

Let's take another look at the Old Testament reading this morning from 2 Kings 23. Once again, the people had turned away from worshipping God, Yahweh, and were sacrificing and worshipping to other gods, such as Baal. During Josiah's reign as king of Judah, the book of the Law was found. When Josiah read it, he realized how far the people had strayed. He proclaimed God's Word to the people; he read in their hearing the Book of the Covenant.

(Verse 3) The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

Today, we are renewing our covenant with God. But what does that mean for us? Many of us are in covenant relationships and don't even realize it. A covenant is a coming together; a bond. Our covenant with God is eternal and bound by His steadfast love. Those of us who are in a Christian marriage are in a covenant relationship. The ceremony is called the Marriage Covenant in our Book of Worship. In it, God promises to bless our union and we are committing our lives to love, honor and cherish our spouse. Hear these words that we have heard so many times before:

“In the name of God, I take you to be my wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. **This is my solemn vow.**”

And others of us have entered into a covenant relationship with God through our baptism and confirmation. If you were baptized as an infant, your parents made this covenant on your behalf and you renewed it at confirmation. If you were of age when you were baptized, you made these commitments yourself. At baptism, we promise to:

- Renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness
- Reject the evil powers of this world
- Repent of our sin
- Accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
- Confess Jesus as our Savior
- Put our whole trust in his grace

- To serve him as our Lord in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races

This is a covenant we make with God, but we also make it as a church. When an infant is baptized, we have a congregational pledge that we make. It's not just reading the words on the screen:

“With God’s help we will order our lives after the example of Christ that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.”

This is a renewal of our covenant with God. We vow to order our lives after the example of Christ and to help the child grow in their faith. What could be more intergenerational than that?

And when we have new members, we renew those same vows from our baptism and the congregational response says: “we renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. We must remind ourselves of these commitments that we make to God and to one another, just as Josiah did with his people. We forget. We stray.

But what is this covenant that we are in with God? As we saw in the video, it is our nature to break the covenants. But God doesn't give up! And the promises that He made generations ago are still true today. Through Jesus, God renews His covenants, establishes a new covenant, and restores our partnership with Him.

Jesus fulfilled all of the covenants. He is a descendant of Abraham through which the whole world will receive the blessings promised to Abraham and his family. He is the true Israelite able to fully obey the law. In fact, he brings us a new commandment; the Great Commandment found in Matthew 22:37-38: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.* He tells us that all the laws and prophets hang on these two commandments. Finally, he is of the house of David and is the one who will bring peace to all the earth. This is what we have celebrated through the advent season. Jesus has fulfilled all of the covenants that were broken. And he gave us a new covenant. In Luke 22:20, Jesus speaks of the new covenant - *In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."*^[a] Through Christ, God promises us the riches of his grace: hope, peace, joy, love, strength; he offers us forgiveness; he promises us that he will not leave us alone and gives us the Holy Spirit to dwell in us; and he promises us eternal life with Him. In our New Testament reading this morning, our part of the covenant is made clear: keep my commands and you will remain in my love. Meaning, you will remain in relationship with me. Jesus says in verse 12: *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* All he asks from us is love.

This may seem easy. Jesus took all of the commands and boiled them down to two: love God and love others. Easy right? No. We are prone to stray from God. We must be reminded and held accountable.

Covenant has been an important part of the Methodist tradition. John Wesley believed in this accountability. He formed covenant groups. The agenda of the weekly meetings was to focus on discipleship and discuss what each member has or has not done to follow the teachings of Jesus in their daily lives. Their covenant together was:

***To witness to Jesus Christ in the world
and to follow his teachings through
acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under the guidance of the Holy
Spirit.***

This is why being part of a faith community is so important. Just like the people of Josiah's day, because no one was there to hold them accountable, they turned away from God. Being in a small group or better yet a covenant group is vital to our growth as disciples. This is not something we can do on our own.

John Wesley also held Covenant services on New Year's Eve. A good time to remind us of our commitment to God and to His church. So I invite you to join with me, as individuals and as a church, to renew our covenant with God today. I invite those of you who may not have made this commitment to God before, to take that step today.

