

# COVENANT WORD

## "Mine."

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

A message by  
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Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.  
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

I decided it was time to clean out the attic. I purchased clear bins to motivate me to climb the ladder and get things organized in that space illusively known as "up there." That was two and a half years ago. And since that time, I have stumped my toe on the bins in the dark of night, and in the light of day, they call to me, reminding me of my duty and filling me with guilt. You know where the path leads that is paved with good intentions, right? Those bins have been moved from the garage to the laundry room to the guest bedroom. And while each move got them closer to the attic, they remained securely below. So, a few weeks ago, in the spirit of Lent, I made the ascent. I packed up boxes and boxes of books. I donated clothes and dorm room items from David's Fashion Institute days. I claimed a pair of rubber boots, and I sorted thousands of Legos from mountains of Playmobil. I found the building blocks that constructed innumerable towers, the bathtub toys, and the wooden train on which Fred and Snap rode. Fred and Snap were our hermit crabs, which I was grateful not to find in the bottom of the box!

I dutifully took to the laundry room a stack of baby quilts along with those sweet baby blue button on pants with white lace shirts with the boys' initials monogrammed thereon. Just when I thought that I had gone as far down memory lane as an attic allows, I unearthed a notebook of letters. The letters were addressed to my friend, Kathryn Josey, who lives in Montgomery, and in them I unveil my courtship with Lloyd. In one of the letters, I suggest that she keep my notes so that our children will one day have

an account of our romance. After reading through them, I am not so sure that this was such a good idea, but Kathryn, ever loyal and resourceful, kept every one! She compiled them in chronological order, put them in a notebook and slipped the notebook in my honeymoon suitcase.

A particularly poignant letter recounts my birthday week in which Lloyd kept surprising me with daily gifts . . . none of which was an engagement ring. I wrote to Kathryn of my disappointment, not realizing that Lloyd had already shown her the ring and unveiled the plan! So on my actual birthday, when Lloyd appeared for our date, he handed me yet another

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gift. In it was a jar of jewelry cleaner. I thanked him and immediately turned to put it away so that he would not see the disappointment on my face. He stopped me. He asked, "Don't you want to open it?" "No, I know what jewelry cleaner looks like," was my reply. But he insisted. He opened the jar, and there on the bottom of that green murky liquid was an engagement ring. "I want you to wear this as a symbol of our love," he said.

I often comment in wedding ceremonies that the rings exchanged are outward symbols of an inner commitment, a covenant that binds lives together. In today's scripture from Jeremiah, the prophet tells the Israelites that they have proof of God's covenant, for on their hearts, God has written a word of possession: "mine," it says.

Like the clothes labels parents patiently write names on when children are shipped off to camp or start school, God takes a great big Sharpie and carefully writes God's claim on us. "This one is mine."

Like other prophets before and after him, Jeremiah has already spent ample time and energy on the claim that Israel has systematically violated the covenant made at Mt. Sinai. We find God to be quite feminine in the tender images used to describe Her dashed hopes for the relationship with Israel. God says that She led them with Her hand, like a parent does with their children. And that God considers their relationship to be like a married couple's bound by holy vows and characterized by fidelity and mutuality. But Israel ignores the established covenant. Their economic policies abuse the poor; their foreign policy depends on arms; their worship practices offend God; and they live with personal illusions of privilege and grandeur. (Have we evolved so very much?) Completely exhausted by the recalcitrant children of Israel, God enacts severe sanctions. Thus, Jerusalem is conquered. The Temple is destroyed and the leading residents of Israel are deported to Babylon in shame, defeat and fear. (Walter Brueggemann, "On Scripture," October 30, 2011) In bewilderment and humiliation, the Israelites sit beside the waters of Babylon and find that they cannot sing their old songs in a new land. They weep and grieve, just as we do when relationships are so broken that home is no more and family restoration appears to be impossible.

***And since those beginning moments, God continues to take our personal chaos and shapes from it launching pads for new life; why? Because God claims us. "You are mine!" God says.***

Jeremiah is clear that the peoples' disobedience to the Sinai covenant is why they are experiencing their current hardships. The communal guilt is so heavy, we wonder how any of them can bear up under it. It is in the midst of this despair that God decides to give a genuine new beginning. Instead of a stone, God decides this time to write her claim on the very hearts

of the Israelites. On their hearts, she writes the possessive claim "mine." This claim allows for a starting over that is characterized not only by forgiveness but by forgetfulness . . . real forgetfulness that moves our sins as far as the east is from the west, never brought to mind again.

(The following taken from Walter Brueggeman, "God's Easter Offer of Newness" *Collected Sermons*, vol 2)

When we look at scripture as the story of God's desire to be in relationship with creation, we find that the God of the gospel has been doing this since time began, for the God of the gospel took primordial chaos in hand and demanded organization. "Let there be heavens and earth!" "Let there be dry land here and oceans here!" "Let there be day and let there be night!" Little by little a dry, ordered fruitful land emerges, an outward symbol of an inner commitment. And since those beginning moments, God continues to take our personal chaos and shapes from it launching pads for new life; why? Because God claims us. "You are mine!" God says.

This God of the gospel also comes to that barren, hopeless couple, Abraham and Sarah. Against all odds, in their old age, God gives them a child, an heir, and opens a future for them. Isaac is an outward symbol of an inner commitment! And ever since then, this God of the gospel has brought life from barrenness, life from death. Why? Because God claims us: "You are mine!" God says.

This God of the gospel came to the slaves in Egypt. They are weary of being the cheap labor in a harsh productions system, and so God hears their cries and comes to deliver them. They paint blood on their door posts as an outward symbol of an inner commitment. And ever since then, God keeps hearing the cries of the exploited bringing freedom, why? Because God claims us: "You are mine!" God says.

This God of the gospel came to the woman with the issue of blood; came to the man lowered through the thatched roof; came to the lepers discovered along the way; came to the woman caught in the act of adultery; came to the disciples in the midst of a storm and when they hid behind locked doors; came to a little girl asleep in her house and to a boy with a small lunch. God restores each one with new life. This God of the gospel opens the flood gates for new

life to wash all over us. For you see, the cross is an outward symbol of an inner commitment. God claims us: "You are mine!" God says.

When the Greeks come to see Jesus in John's gospel, Jesus resorts to a quick parable. Giving an outward symbol of an inner commitment, he teaches, "A grain of wheat cannot grow unless it dies." He is referring to His own death, of course, but is his death so far removed from what the God of the gospel has been doing all along with the chaos and the barrenness and the exploited and through the prophets of Israel? The seed cracks open to send up a shoot that matures into wheat. Does a stalk of wheat ever go back in the seed pod? Does it keep an ongoing list of debts that must be repaid? Does it keep score for personal injuries in relationships? OR does it shed the pod, and grow to maturity leaving the pod behind forever? Isn't this a picture of what God does to bring us close for reconciliation through forgiveness? The old stuff is left behind and the new growth matures into wholeness. What if we could do this not only in our relationship with God but in our relationships with one another? What if we left the hard core resentments, bitterness and grudges behind – forgiven and forgotten – might we, then, at last, be able to grow into wholeness? Here, God is promising to crack open our closed lives with light and air! Here, God is promising to crack open our hard hearts with forgiveness! Here, God is promising to be purposefully forgetful in order that we might belong wholly and completely to God: a people who recognize and believe that on their own hearts is written the word, "mine!"

It has become my practice on Wednesday nights to drive Dorman Higgins home. It is on my way, and we enjoy pleasant conversation. I have learned a little about Dorman's family. He is a veteran. He is a huge Tennessee fan. He tells me about the meetings he attends during the week at the Church of the Reconciler. On Wednesdays at noon, he goes to Independent Presbyterian Church for worship and lunch. He eats breakfast every morning at Highlands United Methodist, and he eats with us on Wednesday nights. He tells me each time I drop him off which service he will attend on the coming Sunday, because he rotates between us and Highlands United

Methodist. He likes the music at both churches. But then, he always adds: "But I like the people at Baptist Church of the Covenant best. They are my kind of people!"

My kind of people. Mine! People who are devoted to understanding God: giving back in service; hospitable; welcoming; inclusive; who go to Barons games! . . . who care; who love unconditionally. God claims us. "You are mine," says the God of the gospel. "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more." Thanks be to God.

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