

THE CALL TO COVENANT –WHERE HAVE YOU MET GOD RECENTLY?

12 Pentecost, Year C, August 22, 2004

The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

When we use the word “covenant” in Scripture or the Church, what are we talking about? A covenant is a solemn promise. It is made binding by an oath. It is more than a legal document. A covenant creates “relationship.” We learn in our biblical studies that covenant is the basis for the God and human relationship. It can’t be cancelled. It can’t be revoked. The history of covenant shows us that God is always faithful, but humanity repeatedly breaks the covenant.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are about 300 mentions of the word “covenant.” The concept of covenant finds its basis in the private agreement between a king and the king’s people (Dictionary of New Testament Theology). The form comes to us from the Hittites and included six points.

First, there was a preamble that identified the parties involved. Titles were mentioned. Second, a historical prologue discusses the previous relationship. This built parameters for the new relationship. Third, the stipulations of the covenant were outlined. This included the obligations, and noted that no other alliances could be made. Fourth, provision was made for a public reading of the covenant. Fifth, witnesses were noted. These were the people who were there at the initial conception of the covenant. Finally, the covenant spelled out the blessings and curses. If the covenant was kept, certain blessings would be bestowed. If you broke the covenant, curses and punishments would be visited upon you.

What we learn from the Hebrew Scriptures is that God’s covenant with the people follows this format. One unique aspect, however, is that this covenant is based in “hesed”, God’s steadfast love. What follows in the bible is a pattern of promise and response. It will set much of what takes place in Israel over the years. What we witness is an active and real relationship. The Jewish people will reaffirm the covenant in their liturgy and cultic acts. The covenant can be summed up in this paraphrase, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

The first examples in Scripture that we have of covenant are those with Abraham, Noah and David. There is a promise from God of descendants and the land. With it comes a demand to follow only God. We see early in the Bible the unique shaping of the relationship between God and the people.

The best known example is the Mosaic covenant from the Hebrew Scriptures. We know it as the Ten Commandments. This covenant will lay out the ethical conditions, the social relationships and the religious grounding for the Hebrew people. The preamble is simple enough, “I’m God, there are no others.” The historical prologue is familiar to us. The Hebrews were rescued from slavery in Egypt and freed by God’s agent, Moses. They come to Mt. Sinai to receive the “law.”

The stipulations are the relationships that will exist between God and the people, and the people with each other. The promise is peace, protection and life! The public reading first comes with the people who follow Moses. Later, the Ten

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Commandments will become the heart of the teaching of the Hebrews. The witnesses to the first event are Moses, the people and God. However, the people will come to know that all generations that follow will also become witnesses. Finally, the blessings and curses will play themselves out in the life of Israel. There will be fertility or famine, health or disease, victory or defeat, peace or destruction, life or death.

The Old Covenant will always be part of our history and tradition. But there is a new covenant that is made known to us in the Christian Scriptures. There are more than 30 references to covenant here. Most refer to the Hebrew covenant. The notion of covenant is most implicit for us in the Holy Communion. It is bound up in the person of Jesus Christ. The common meal we share reveals the work of Jesus in fulfilling the covenant. We have a new promise ... forgiveness, reconciliation, unity with God, communion.

Now we have been presented with a new foundation in the covenant, it is love. Now there is a new response expected from us ... that we love one another. The covenant still has to do with life and death. If we are in this relationship with God, we can expect to experience life. If, the result will be death.

How do we know when we are in covenant? We might start by asking ourselves, "Where have you met God this past week?" Covenant is about relationship. God promises to love us. Jesus promises to be with us always. Have we seen God in our life? To be in relationship is to see it living out in our life.

I have been asking a question of most groups when we meet at Grace Church. I ask them at the end of the meeting to tell me where they have met God in the past week. It has taught us look for God in our lives. It is also fascinating to hear the responses of people. We are learning to look for God. We are learning to share these God moments with each other. It can change our lives in ways that we can't imagine.

I'd like to share a few examples from my life this past summer. I recently spoke with a couple in the parish that are thinking of adopting a child. After some discussion, they mention the possibility of adopting a Chinese daughter. I thought of another couple I knew who had two adopted Chinese daughters. I haven't seen them in a while. Yesterday, I went to officiate at a house blessing. Who do you think are the neighbors of the parishioners I went to visit? You guessed it! The very people I was thinking about! This was one of those God moments.

I think of the Spanish immersion camp we did last week. That certainly was a God filled experience. One parent came to me mid week and said, "Help! My daughter keeps asking me the Spanish words for things at home! And on the playground, she sings the songs she learned at camp this week!" Another God moment. I think of the churches I visited this summer on vacation. There were God moments there as well. There was a recent story from parishioner about a healing in her life. There

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was the experience of working with parishioners at St. Martin's in Lumberton on flood relief. All of these were God moments for me.

Perhaps one of the most powerful moments was Friday evening. My wife is in Maine visiting her mother. Sean was getting ready to head off for the week with a friend for the week. He came in to say goodbye and gave me a big hug. That was unexpected and very nice! You have to accept all the hugs you can from teenagers! Sean said to me, "Now mom will be back tomorrow, right?" "No," I answered, "I don't pick her up until Sunday night." I saw a look of deep concern come over my son's face and he said, "Will you be alright?"

Now that was a first for me. My son was concerned about leaving me alone! It was a God moment. It was an insight into my son growing up. It was a shift in our relationship. Covenants can do that too. They change us, perhaps even transform us! These God moments are life giving.

Covenant talks about our relationship with God, and each other. There are all kinds of God moments. Our response to God can be seen in these moments. We must keep up our end of the covenant. God keeps up the other end! All we need to do is see the covenant at work in our lives. It's as simply as looking back on the week and seeing where you met God. Our sharing can help others meet God by looking for the moments too.

Where have you met God this past week?