

A COVENANT RELATIONSHIP

(10/01/17)

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 8:8-12; Mark 6:6b-13

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; . . . I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Hebrews 8:8,10)

This morning we renewed our covenant, the promises we made on October 5, 1997 and still make to each other and to our church each year as pastor and parishioners. I can't believe this is our twentieth anniversary! And we're still friends . . . (I hope)!

There are four dimensions of the covenant we renewed this morning. The first is our covenant with God. We covenant to follow God's teaching, to strive to deepen our relationship with God, and to place God in the center of our life.

The second is our covenant with this church. When we became members of this church, we promised to support this church with our time, talent, and treasure, to be faithful in attending worship and responsive to opportunities to grow in the faith. We vowed to do whatever we can to build, maintain, and strengthen the little community of faith that is this church.

The third is the covenant relationship we have with each other as pastor and parishioners. The litany in which we participated this morning is not a job description of your pastor but an articulation of our mutual responsibilities as we minister faithfully to each other.

The fourth dimension involves our mission outreach, our ministry outside ourselves, the many ways we reach out to those in need. This also finds expression in how we bring our faith, our values to bear on social situations, e.g., in the shaping of social policy.

At various times in our lives we renew and reaffirm our covenants. We might renew the covenant vows of our marriage on a special anniversary. When a child is baptized, we reaffirm the covenant dimension of our relationship with God that was symbolized in that event. On communion Sunday we gather around the table with our Lord just as the disciples did at the Last Supper, renewing our commitment to grow in discipleship.

Rally Sunday and Re-Covenanting Sunday mark the beginning of a new year in the life of our church. Coincidentally, this is also the time of year when our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate their new year through the renewal of their covenant relationship with God. With the frightening waves of anti-Semitism that have recently found freedom of expression by the right-wing bigots of our nation and other nations, I thought this might be a good time to remind ourselves of all we have in common with our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith.

Two weeks ago our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrated Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah, also known as “The Day of the Sounding of the Ram’s Horn” or “Trumpets,” is the celebration of the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah, which lasts two days, is celebrated in the autumn. This is when the summer drought comes to an end in Palestine and when the soil is plowed for the winter grain.

There are several legends that became associated with Rosh Hashanah through the millennia. It is believed to be the day on which Adam was created out of clay. It is celebrated as the birthday of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the day Joseph was released from prison, and the day Moses demanded that Pharaoh let the Israelites go. Whether or not Rosh Hashanah is the actual day these momentous events took place, it is obvious that they all involve the theme of God’s covenant and the theme of new beginnings.

The mood of Rosh Hashanah is different from that of our secular celebration of New Year. It is not celebratory. It marks the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance, also called the Solemn Days, the High Holy Days, and the Fearful Days. The mood is serious and solemn. The sounding of the *shofar* or trumpet in the synagogues on Rosh Hashanah is to awaken those who have fallen asleep or drowsed in their fulfillment of their covenant. I like the symbolism of this part of the ceremony, for the theme of awakening is one that I find especially meaningful.

Rosh Hashanah is grounded in the Jewish belief that there is a Book of Life in heaven, and that our every thought, feeling, word, and deed are recorded in this book during the twelve months of the year. On Rosh Hashanah, when the Book of Life is opened, our good and evil deeds are carefully examined. After the life we have lived in the year that has ended has been examined, our fate for the coming year is written into the Book.

This belief is not unlike the Buddhist notion of karma. Karma is the realization that our actions have consequences that extend over time, perhaps over many years, perhaps over all our life, perhaps even into the next life. I can buy that. What we have done in this past year will shape who we are, what we will do, and will become our “fate” in the year to come.

In addition to the trumpet and book, another symbol that is associated with Rosh Hashanah is a pair of scales. This is a reminder that our deeds are weighed and judged by God. We talked about this aspect of our relationship with God a few weeks ago when we asked which is more important: judgment or forgiveness, and we decided that Jesus would say, “both.”

Today, on Re-Covenanting Sunday, let us think back over the year that has just passed. How faithful were we to our covenant with God, this church, each other, and the world? What is written in the Book of Life under our name?

Yesterday, ten days after the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish brothers and sisters observed Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is known as the Day of Atonement.

The ninth day of the Ten Days of Repentance, the day before Yom Kippur, is a special day of preparation. At the synagogue, a long table is covered with plates. Every plate has a card on it designating the charitable organization it represents. During the afternoon service, the worshipers walk past the plates slowly, placing their contributions on some or all of the plates. They do this because of the Jewish belief that *tzedakah*, an act of charity, may save one from the punishment that one deserves based on the reading of that person's Book of Life.

On the afternoon before Yom Kippur, either in the synagogue or at home, worshippers join in a meal. This meal must be finished and the table cleaned before sunset. After sunset, everyone except children under thirteen, the elderly, and the sick will fast until sunset of the following day. This fast is undertaken to remind the faithful of the sacred dimension of this day, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, and the importance of sacrifice to our spiritual journey.

At dusk on the day before Yom Kippur, men, women, and children gather in the synagogue. The torahs are taken out of the Holy Ark. The congregation rises. The cantor begins to chant the solemn and haunting *Kol Nidre* prayer. This prayer is chanted three times.

On the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, worship services begin early and last until evening. Several times during the day the congregation makes a confession of every possible kind of sin and wrongdoing, just in case any of the sins mentioned has been committed unknowingly. The entire congregation participates in the list of confessions, and forgiveness is asked for the congregation as a whole.

Part of the Yom Kippur service is the *Yizkor*, or memorial prayer for the dead. *Yizkor* is recited for the departed on several Jewish holidays, including the last day of Passover. The soul being mourned is mentioned by name and the mourner pledges to give *tzedakah*, charity, as a memorial tribute. You can see how important charity is to Jewish religious belief and worship. We observe this when we give to our Memorial Fund in memory of a loved one who has died.

A story that illustrates the importance of confession and atonement on Yom Kippur tells of an angel whom God punished for wrongdoing by sending him to earth to bring back the most precious thing he could find there.

The angel returned with a drop of blood from a soldier dying for his country. He was told that this was indeed precious, but not the most precious of all the things on earth.

The angel, discouraged, returned to earth. This time he came back with the last breath of a heroic woman who had sacrificed her life for others. He was told that this was indeed more precious than the drop of blood, but it was still not the most precious thing in God's sight.

The angel returned to his quest. He flew back and forth over the earth despairing that he should ever be able to find that which is most precious to God. Suddenly something caught his eye. He swooped down just as a criminal was about to kill an innocent man.

At the very last moment, with his knife raised, the criminal hesitated. He felt a wave of compassion for his victim. He felt himself filled with repentance for his anger and the harm it had caused to others. He knew he could not follow through on his intended deed. At that moment, a single tear, a tear of repentance, rolled down his cheek. The angel scooped up the tear and brought it back to heaven.

The tear of repentance was accepted as the most precious thing on earth. The angel was forgiven and was welcomed back into heaven.

On this special day in the life of our church, like our Jewish brothers and sisters we should pause and look back over the year that has passed. What has been written into the Book of Life under our name? Have we been true to our covenant with God, our church, each other, and those in special need throughout the world?

Like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we should begin the renewal of our covenant in an attitude of repentance. This is how we begin each of our communion services--with a communal prayer of confession and our private prayers of confession. We identify those parts of ourselves that are weak and in need of strengthening, those parts of ourselves that are crooked and in need of straightening, those parts of ourselves that are sick and in need of healing. Then we open our hearts to receive God's forgiveness, God's grace, and God's healing love.

If we do this, we will enter into the new church year affirming a renewed covenant with God, our church, each other, and with life.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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October 1, 2017*