

Covenant Renewal
Sermon October 6, 2013
Joshua 24:14-28

This morning is the fourth sermon in our series on the book of Joshua
And today I have the opportunity of preaching about the covenant
ceremony at the end of the book.

In chapter 24, Joshua invites the Israelites to consider a covenant
renewal with God with the following imperative -

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

Joshua already has his own response ready.

“As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”

As you’ve heard repeatedly in the last three sermons on Joshua, these
words were written down as many as 500 years after the events
described.

That’s a lot of time and one might correctly conclude that in the story of
the relationship between Israel and her God the proverbial honeymoon
was indeed over.

The first blush of romance, the head over heels falling in love with the
God

who chose and blessed their ancestors,

who rescued them from slavery,

and promised them a land where God would be their God and they
would be God’s people.

Their easy delight in a God who had revealed God’s divine character
through burning bushes,

dramatic sea crossings on dry land,

provision of food in the wilderness,

cloud and fire guardianship
and warrior who apparently fought their battles for them.

All that was remarkably good and promising
Enough time had passed that things were getting complicated. Not
everything along the way had gone smoothly.
Let's see, the time of the Judges where the people pretty much failed to
do what God required of them
the time of the Kings, where they longed to be like every other nation
The time of the prophets and exile where they were dragged out of the
land that it had seemed so clear that God had given them.
And now this writing of their story of conquest that never made things
very clear about who was "in" and who was "out" of this story and
whether the land was exclusively theirs or not.

This covenant relationship with God definitely had not been all wine
and roses or even bread and honey.

From one generation to the next this relationship already had been both
challenging and risky. And yet, here they were again presented with the
challenge, choose this day whom you will serve.

To which day does this question refer?

This day – is it post exilic, is it post crusades, is it post colonial conquest
of the West is it this day?

I think the answer is "yes," this day.

Choose this day whom you will serve – because part of being in love, part of being in relationship at all is choosing each day how you’re going to go about being in that relationship.

Can we say with Joshua that we will serve the God named YahWeh, - the God with the unpronounceable name, the God who says - I am who I am. How do we say that we will serve YahWeh, when the honeymoon is over and Joshua and Judges and Kings and the prophets and the crusades and colonialism and being settlers in a land that first belonged to others all witness to the profound difficulties people have keeping the covenant that God initiated with Israel and through Jesus extended to us. Joshua even says in this text that it can’t be done.

Just after the people say that they **will** serve YHWH, in verse 19 Joshua says,

“You will not be able to serve YHWH. This is a God most holy, a jealous God, a God who doesn’t forgive your transgressions and your sins. If you desert YHWH and serve foreign gods, after all God has done for you, you will bring disasters – fatal ones – upon yourselves.”

“Fair warning,” the people might have said, but they protested and said instead with conviction, “No, we will serve YHWH.” And as I read this I was relieved by their persistence. And they set up a large stone as a witness to their conviction.

Now, a straight forward moral connection between the Joshua story and our own is a misuse of the text, but if we widen the scope, as narrative theology encourages us to do, and think about where we are now in the

big story of God's people – along the way there are some helpful things to keep in mind.

To summarize my concern for today: What makes a communal covenant relationship with God possible and sustainable when we are only too aware of our human frailty and failings as in our confession at the beginning of the service?

What makes it possible to renew our covenant on this day?

First it helps to keep in mind that God started it.

God initiated this relationship and sustains it with a faithfulness that is new every morning. God creates, pursues, saves and sustains God's people. It's a bit one-sided that way. Trouble is, we've got the power to choose other god's, or in today's language, other loyalties. How did Pieter put it last week? The question of idolatry that plagued them plagues us. Other gods demand our allegiance. Discerning the nature and identity of those other gods isn't easy. Even though God initiates the covenant, a regular discernment and choice of loyalty to this God is part of what it means to be in covenant relationship with God.

Again, what makes it possible to renew our covenant this day?

Second, rehearse the story often. It's amazing to me how much friendships and even marriages are rekindled by the telling and re-telling of how the relationship formed in the first place. Every relationship has its own creation story so to speak. Tell yours to someone and see how it has the potential to re-orient you to the

commitment that you have made to each other, or to the ties that bind you to each other – this holds true for siblings, close friendships and marriages.

One way we retell our story is through our TUMC Litany of identity, which we will do in a few minutes. As well, Heritage Club at St. Clair O'Connor covers many different topics and themes but often part of what they do is recount different parts of the Mennonite story. This type of storytelling makes an important contribution to remembering who we are and whose we are as a people called to be part of a covenant with God.

Third, we participate in rituals that help us remember God's initiative and retell our story. Jesus himself instituted our most important ritual. **22** While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

23 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

24 "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. **25** "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Repeatedly to "this day" we celebrate this covenant that through Jesus has been extended to all who commit to following him in life. That's ritual.

We have songs that are part of our ritual life as well. The song, *Obey my voice*, is one of them. It's the song we sing following the reception of new members and the covenant renewal that event initiates for us.

Aldred told me the history of that song. Apparently we've been singing it since the 1970's when Darrel Fast was pastor here. It was composed in 1970, sung at a General Conference Assembly, made available here first as photocopies and eventually printed in the 1979 Sing and Rejoice song book. By now of course we mostly sing it for memory.

That song simply and beautifully captures God's desire for our complete loyalty.

to conclude for today

How is keeping covenant possible when the bloom is off the rose? When the honeymoon is over? When we know our frailty only too well?

By remembering:

God started it

Tell the story often

participate in rituals of remembrance and covenant making

recognize that there are challenges and risks along the way,

and choose this day – in fact choose each day whom we will serve.

Are we able this day to say with Joshua – as for me and my house – we will serve the One with the unpronounceable name, the I am who I am, the Creator, YHWH, the LORD?

If we can say yes, then let's tell our story together through our TUMC

Litany of Identity and sing together one of our ritual songs.

