

## **Ties That Bind ~ March 1, 2009**

**Genesis 9:8-17; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15; Psalm 25:1-10**

This morning you are going to hear more about covenants in this brief meditation than you ever wanted to hear about covenants. Our readings for this Lenten season have an emphasis on covenants and so will we.

Many parts of our lives are tied up in promises or covenants of one sort or another. When a child is baptized, the parents and godparents make a promise to God that he or she will be raised with a basic knowledge of our faith. When we marry we make promises to one another that we will support and sustain each other throughout life. When we take a job we often agree to a contract with an employer. Some of these covenants may be broken and some of these ties are less binding than others.

There are conditional and unconditional covenants. A conditional covenant follows the formula "If you will do x, or y, or z, I will do q." An unconditional covenant is a promise by one party to do something with no quid pro quo.

An unconditional covenant was the kind God made with Noah, our story tells us. A promise marked by a bow in the sky. Hanging up a bow signaled the end of battle. We look to the rainbow as the sign God gave humans that there would never be another flood that would wipe out the earth. It is always interesting to note that our Creator mentions that when God sees the bow in the skies it will remind the deity of this promise. This gives God the rather human quality of forgetfulness.

There are many other covenants in the Hebrew Scriptures, notably the one between God and Abraham, which was conditional. If Abraham left his land to follow God and did as he was told, God would make of him a nation. Abraham fulfilled his part of the bargain and, the story tells us, God did too.

The concept of covenant stretches from one end of our Bible to the other and beyond its pages. We hear a bit of it in our reading from the First Letter of Peter. Jesus fulfilled the promise he had made during his time in the wilderness to bring people to God.

The word "testament" means "covenant." So, we have the old covenant between humans and God and the new covenant between humans and God revealed by Jesus. This new covenant is conditional, if we follow the teachings of Jesus we will lead lives of abundance and will receive the same reward he did.

Beyond the pages of our Bible, the concept of covenant found a home in Congregationalism. We often say our churches are not "creedal," but "covenantal."

This means that all continuing Congregational Churches, of which this church is one, do not ascribe to one creed or statement of faith. We do not require such a litmus test to determine who may be a member and who may not.

While some of our churches may have a statement of faith in their by-laws, it is usually separated from the covenant. The first paragraph in our covenant is, in fact, a statement of faith and we need to label it as such. The actual covenant begins with the second paragraph. It reads:

*We are united in striving to know the purposes of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or yet to be made known to us.*

*We hold it to be the mission of the church to proclaim the gospel to all humanity, exalting the worship of God and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human harmony.*

*Depending, as did our forebears, upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of righteousness and the life everlasting.*

Our covenant is based on another church's covenant with a few changes in words. This is not an unusual practice. Although every Congregational church writes its own covenant, very often bits and pieces are taken from other times and places.

The covenant is, basically, an agreement made between the members and God. It states what we intend to do to further the kingdom of God. When someone joins a Congregational church, he or she agrees to become part of a covenantal relationship and to uphold the promises we make to one another and God. We will be considering the ways we do this when we meet with Jim Hopkins in April to work together gathering ideas and making plans for the future of this church.

We seem to have come far with our human covenants from the simple promise God made to Noah following the flood. We don't always remember our promise to walk nicely together when we enter into discussion with one another. However, this is all right, for we know that wherever there are two Congregationalists gathered together, there are always three opinions. We also know that there are weathervanes instead of crosses on Congregational churches because we change our position on any subject whenever the wind blows. This keeps things exciting and keeps us alive. Just remember that we were Separatists and Non-Conformists in origin. We still are.

But, beneath all that may seem to go on at times, we are always under girded by our promise, our covenant to one another, that assures that we will continue to walk together to discern just where it is we must be going and what it is God is calling us to do. Whatever surface winds may ripple the calm, beneath it all, the tie that binds us together is love and we resolve any differences for the good of our beloved church.

Because we are able to do this, we renew and reflect our covenant and we join a long line of those who have made promises to God and kept them through the ages.

-- Amen