

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Genesis of Our Faith: Covenant
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Genesis 12:1-8; Revelation 21:1-7

Finally after a sermon on consequences, then idolatry, we have finally come to “covenant.” No offense to consequences or idolatry, but I have been looking forward to this one the most. The concept of covenant is essential to scripture and our faith as Christians.

Covenant is not a term we hear often in our daily lives anymore. Today we run into more contracts or agreements which are similar but are a bit more stark compared to how God uses covenants.

When we look at contracts today the reasons two parties come to a table to form a contract often include obvious or not so obvious personal agendas. These agendas usually put an individual's own interests ahead of the interests of their partner even though they have a mutual goal. That is why contracts include extensive outlines of who will do what and how and by when. We try to cover all our bases so our partner knows exactly what our expectations are. It is a happy day when both partners can truly help each other but there is always an edge of “if this stops being mutually beneficial the partnership will dissolve.”

Because that sense exists in our modern contracts, we usually include rules around what will happen if the partnership needs to end. We outline consequences of what will happen if someone does not do what they promised. This protects the interests that brought us to the table to begin with and makes sure we make it out of the partnership at least as good if not better than we started.

All of this means that the two partners can expect a relationship that sits on ice that could break eventually. Some partnerships develop great trust and true friendship. They learn to care for the other's interests as well as their own and may even let the written rule bend a little when times get hard because they care about the wellbeing of the other. Yet even in these well made partnerships the contract sits somewhere in the back of the relationship ready to be pulled out when things need to be made right again.

We know contracts can change relationships immediately. It's why we caution college students about rooming with their best friends. It's why we are skeptical of marriages with prenups. We know putting a legally binding contract between two people can fundamentally change the way they interact with one another. The people we read about in scripture felt the same way. They had seen landlords take advantage of tenants. They had seen one partner trick the other into unfair contracts. These traumas lead to a practice called the covenant of the pieces.

The covenant of the pieces ritual was a way for a partner to assure another that they were trustworthy and committed to the success of the partnership. The partner that needed to prove themselves brought an animal to a meeting place, cut it in half and spread the blood in the middle creating a path between the two pieces of the animal. One partner would walk through the middle on this “red carpet” declaring that if they do not uphold their end of the partnership they too could be split in half like the animal was. It was the ultimate “I swear on

my mother's grave" statement made to appease a skeptical partner. It meant the person who walked through the middle took on full responsibility for the success of the partnership.

It is a practice we see God invoke just a few chapters after the initial covenant with Abraham. In chapter 15 of Genesis, just three chapters after God's first interaction with Abraham, we see Abraham become doubtful of the things God promised. Sarah still has not had a child and Abraham decides to declare Ishmael his heir thinking this is the only way to make God's promise a reality. God shows up to say "NO." Sarah will be the one to bear you your heir. Then God asks Abraham to prepare the ritual of the covenant of the pieces. God tells Abraham to bring a cow, a goat, a ram, pigeons and doves to create the covenant path.

Abraham thinks he is the one who is going to have to walk through the middle. He after all is the partner who has shown doubts so Abraham thinks God is asking him to prepare this path to prove to God he is willing to take full responsibility for the covenant. This act will mean that if he strays again and tries to pick a different heir God has the right to cut him in half like the animals. But when Abraham is ready to walk the path he falls asleep and God is the one who passes through the middle. God takes on the responsibility of the covenant.

For people who understood the covenant of the pieces ritual this would have been an astonishing twist. The weaker partner should have walked the path, but it is God, the stronger of the two who doubles down and clearly professes a commitment to the partnership. God takes Abraham's place and accepts full responsibility for reaching the goals their partnership is working towards.

Sounds familiar doesn't it? Sounds like another time in scripture where God shows up to take on the responsibility of the weakness of humanity and takes our place on the cross. God never changes. From the beginning of the covenant with Abraham to the new covenant declared by Jesus, God is the one who bears the full responsibility of our partnership. Knowing full well we will doubt, we will stray, we will not uphold our end of the bargain 100% of the time, knowing all this God repeatedly steps in to say, "I am still committed to our partnership."

If God were a human, we would be screaming at them to stop making covenants like these. I would be advising God to set some healthy boundaries and begging God to stop letting their partners take advantage of God's good will. If this was a human-human partnership it would be time for the partners to end the relationship. We simply do not have the mental or emotional resources to handle the kind of abuse that God brushes off daily.

Which is why when we realize we have let God down we often choose to abandon God altogether. It is hard for us to imagine God welcoming us back, forgiving us, and wanting to continue being in relationship with us. Yet that is what God does over and over in scripture and in the lives of people around us.

We can see how humans constantly and consistently fail to be good partners to God. Adam and Eve, Cain, the flood and Babel are all stories about humanity being terrible partners. In those stories, God steps in and corrects the course of human error on God's own. God creates a new place to live for Adam and Eve when they fail. God admonishes and protects Cain when he fails. God sends a flood to reset the course of creation after humanity fails. God confuses language when the people of Babel fail. God takes full control and redirects humanity after each failure.

With Abraham we begin to see God enact a different strategy. Humans are obviously not responding well when God steps in to fix things so God thinks maybe humans will listen to other humans better. God chooses one particular human family to be the example for the rest. This family will show the rest of the world what it is like to be in partnership with God and will help direct humanity as a whole toward the kind of world God wants for everyone.

Abraham's family grows and becomes Israel. The covenant is then extended to all the people of Israel. God doubles down on the covenant strategy and declares a covenant with the whole community. Then when that community becomes a nation under the rule of King David, God again renews the covenant. Extending the promises to all the people of that nation.

That is definitely the sugar coated explanation of the covenant partnership. We all know how well humanity keeps their end of the covenant. Abraham doubts God constantly as he waits for Sarah to bear a child. Abraham is not able to bear the blessings of God into the world perfectly. Israel worships other Gods and becomes experts at groaning about any minor inconvenience. They are not able to keep the law perfectly. King David, well he was not a perfect person and did not lead a perfect nation. They were not able to enact God's justice perfectly even though they had become a great nation.

The covenant strategy should have been abandoned centuries ago, and yet God stayed committed to the success of the partnership. God stays true to the ritual of the covenant of the pieces and every time the partnership seems unsavable, God recommits Godself to us and to the promises God has made.

These unfulfilled covenants between Abraham, Israel, and David are why we say Jesus is from the family of Abraham so that he can be the one family member who actually brings blessings to the whole world. We also point to Jesus as the faithful Israelite who kept the law perfectly. And Jesus is the King from the line of David to continue the work of justice that David was not able to fulfill. Jesus is the one who can and does uphold humanity's end of the partnership with God.

God takes on all the responsibility to fulfill the covenant when God comes to us as Jesus.

Our representative in the covenant is the one who is the perfect partner. Jesus makes it possible for us to work on being better partners without the fear of God revoking the covenant because of our inability. Jesus solidified the partnership and we are free to follow that example, hopefully getting better and better, closer and closer, to the goal of blessing the world and bringing about justice for all of creation, or as Revelation puts it, when God makes their dwelling place among us.

Our defenses should be sending up red flags by now because the covenant system that God keeps reinforcing is easily taken advantage of. We can recognize a poorly drafted contract when we see it. It is absolutely an arrangement that is easily exploited and humans have been exploiting it from day one (well, day 6 to be exact). It is true that if God takes on all the responsibility of the partnership, humans will bail on their responsibility.

But they were doing that anyway. God stepping in with massive redirections and resets was not changing human behavior. The exile from Eden, the flood, Babel did not fix our rebellion. and in addition to humans not behaving better, God was not feeling fulfilled by being our overlord. God wanted partners.

God got into a covenant knowing we were not ever going to be an equally responsible partner, but God can handle our shortfalls. What Jesus then tries to remedy is the shame and guilt we put on ourselves when we fall short. We expect the partnership with God to work like a human partnership. There is only so much a human can take from a partner before they have to dissolve the relationship and move on. The shame and guilt we feel when we are not good partners with God convinces us God will respond the same way the humans in our lives, and so we turn away and abandon God thinking that we don't have a chance to fix the partnership.

Jesus is proof God wants us back in the partnership. The message of the cross drowns out the message of shame and guilt. We are not too far gone, we have not messed up beyond God's good graces, God still wants to partner with us so that when blessings and justice prevail we can be a part of the success and share in the celebration when God lives among us again.

So, yes, the covenant God makes with us is easily exploited, but God knows what God got themselves into and they enter the covenant again and again fully and with great joy, because God wants partners and wants to share the victory with us. May we hold our responsibility better each day and never let shame or guilt convince us God wants anything else but to renew our partnership.