

The New Covenant

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[0 : 0 0] Our God and Father, you have spoken to us through your word. You have established your covenant with us. Help us as a covenant people to know that covenant and to respond with all our heart's love.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. That passage of scripture from which the sermon comes this morning is Jeremiah 31 and verse 31 and following.

And it was read as the Old Testament lesson, for which I'm grateful. And I would like you to turn to it on page 696 in the Blue Pew Bible, which you will find in front of you.

One of the commentaries says about this passage that it summarizes the whole of the book of Jeremiah. And if you've ever tried to read the book of Jeremiah, you will be grateful to know that there is such a brief summary because Jeremiah goes on and on and on.

So here is the heart of it. Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 31 following, where the new covenant is announced. It is in addition to that, the verses which are quoted at length in the New Testament, longer than any other passage in the New Testament, where it appears in Hebrews chapter 8.

[1 : 4 4] Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. And I want to talk to you about that new covenant.

You are familiar with the fact that the last part of the Bible is called the New Testament. And that comes really from Jeremiah and from these words that, behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel.

When it was translated into Latin, they used testament as in the last will and testament of John Jones, which might be read to the family of John Jones after the decease of John Jones and would state what John Jones wants to happen to the things he leaves behind him.

And that is his testament. And that the New Testament should be called, in effect, the new covenant because it's a relationship to God which is left to us by this last will and testament of the one who died on the cross.

That was his purpose for us and that was the purpose that was realized with his resurrection. So, that's the word, the covenant.

[3 : 1 3] And I would like you to say it over to yourself so that you have it clearly in mind. This sermon is about the covenant, the new covenant, the covenant of which Christ says, this is the new covenant in my blood, the covenant which you have just entered into again and afresh by partaking of the Holy Communion, the covenant which is recorded in the scriptures of the New Testament.

It is the covenant that we bring our children here to be baptized into this covenant. When we come to be married, we make a covenant between a man and a woman which is meant to illustrate the nature of the covenant that exists between God and man or God and all of humankind.

And in the relationship of marriage, it's an internal relationship. It's a loving relationship. We had a lovely wedding or two here yesterday and the bride and groom obviously loved each other and it didn't matter how many rules I might want to impose upon them.

They were quite happy to accept the relationship because of the way they felt internally towards one another. And so marriage is given to you as a picture of the covenant between God and his people.

And the reason the church has such a hard time with the divorce is that it is unimaginable. There is no way that you could ever picture God divorcing his people.

[4 : 50] He has committed himself to us. That commitment is an unconditional and total commitment. And when marriage is to reflect that relationship, it's impossible to conceive of divorce ever happening because then it would, in a sense, cast aspersions on that covenant which God has made with his people.

Now it remains true that many people enter into a marriage contract or covenant with one another which is subsequently broken. And I suppose that by the grace and mercy of God, some people discover the unchanging total commitment of God to them in Christ which they hadn't known and hadn't realized that their marriage should reflect.

But somehow God has made this commitment to us and he has established it and this is the covenant by which we live our lives. We confirm, as I say, our membership in this covenant by partaking of this meal of bread and wine.

We bring our children into this covenant in baptism, claiming the promises of God, the unilateral promises of God toward this child through Christ.

The great symbol of the covenant is the cross of Jesus Christ. The thing that seals the covenant is the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 24] The impact of the covenant is we become one family, sharing not the blood which courses through our veins by our genetic inheritance, but by that one family which is ours because we belong to one another in Jesus Christ.

And that covenant is established because God had, from the beginning, been a covenant-making God. And he entered into a covenant with Abraham and with Isaac and with Jacob and with their posterity forever.

And he entered into a covenant with Moses in which he gave the Ten Commandments. And he enters into a covenant with us through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

A new covenant is established. The terms of that new covenant are established for us when you read carefully the passage selected for the Old Testament today.

And it says that this new covenant is going to be characterized by the law no longer being written in stone, but the law is now going to be written in the fleshly tables of our hearts.

[7 : 38] Where is the law going to come from? It's going to be the spontaneous response of loving hearts to a God who has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ.

That's where the law is going to be written. And that's where obedience to the law is going to come from. Not from imposed authority that tell you how to behave, but from a heart's response to a God who has loved you and given his son Jesus Christ to die for you.

It's going to be written in your heart. The terms of the covenant are the ancient terms which are repeated over and over again throughout the whole of scripture.

I will be your God and you will be my people. And that's a great statement of faith by God because over and over again people turn against him and reject him and disobey him and renounce him and fail to believe in him.

But he says, and this is God's great faith, nevertheless, I am your God and you will be my people. Ultimately, you will respond.

[8 : 49] Ultimately, you will recognize my love. Ultimately, you and all the peoples of the earth will come to respond to the fact that I am indeed your God and you find your identity as my people.

That's who you are. And one day, you'll come to realize it. For now, maybe one or two here and there, a small group here and there, but this is the covenant that I will establish.

By way of contrast, let me tell you that the two great enigmas of the 20th century, my friend told me, are these, first, the nuclear bomb and second, the Holocaust.

How do we explain those in terms of a loving, sovereign, covenant-making God? Well, I don't know how to explain them and you have to explain them just as much as I do because this is your world where you live too and you have to come to some answers.

But let me tell you something about that. The one thing the bomb does for us and one thing that makes us invest millions and millions and millions of dollars in armaments is that the only way you can establish any kind of order on our planet is through a covenant of fear and the ultimate instrument of fear is in our hands.

[10 : 15] So now we can establish a covenant among all the people of the world but that's not the covenant that Jeremiah is talking about and that's not the covenant that God has established.

That's a human covenant and the basis of it is not love but fear. And when you think about the Holocaust you will see in a sense acted out on the stage of history man's total rejection of the concept of a covenant people of God in order that we as men and women can be who we want to be there must be no covenant with God.

And so those people who have carried through the centuries the burden of being the covenant people those people who are a model for the Christian church of what it means to be a covenant people those people were deliberately destroyed.

Man's response to God's covenant. So you see covenant is something we live by. Covenant is something that we draw our breath by.

And the covenant that God has made with us is a covenant in which he has said I will be your God and you will be my people. He said it won't be a matter of teaching each one his neighbor and each one his brother.

[11 : 41] but you will all know me. And that is that ultimately we will all end up in that covenant relationship to the God who has made himself known to us in Christ.

We will have entered into that covenant. We will know the Lord in a personal way in a corporate way.

We will know him and that will be the evidence that we have entered into a new covenant. Not someone trying to impose laws on us. Not someone trying to make us behave.

But a covenant relationship which comes out of knowing God himself. Knowing the Lord. And not only will that be characteristic of the covenant that will apply to people from the least to the greatest.

I was terrified in King's College in Dalhousie last week by the immense accumulation of intellectual knowledge which gravitates towards centers of learning and the ideas and the philosophies that come pouring in on students and from students and the brilliant intellectual concepts and philosophical axioms that they get hold of are quite terrifying.

[13 : 07] and it was only in a kind of wonderful experience of the grace of God in my own life that I found the courage to stand up and say all those things count for nothing if there is not that relationship to God in Jesus Christ which is offered to us in the terms of a new covenant.

It was a great experience for me and it's what I need to remind myself of and to remind you of. By the terms of this covenant the one who makes the covenant says I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sins no more.

now this is where God gets into great trouble because most of us have come to the conclusion is that if God has any function in our world it is surely to make people to behave and what if I profess to be under the covenant of God and I have been bad and what if I disobey and what if I fail and what if I don't believe well all those things are things which come on us and say I can't believe I won't believe I won't obey I have failed too often I am committed and addicted to sin to choosing or not to having a choice but living my life without choice all those things happen to me but you see the nature of this covenant is that it in a sense is a unilateral covenant it doesn't depend on your response it depends on what

God has done for us in Christ it depends on him and I in Christ have entered into that covenant relationship now you say and I can't I can't I can't disagree with you but you see the obvious problem with God doing that is that we will say thank you very much God and go on living our own lives we will say well if you've done it all then what is there for me to do but enjoy it thank you very much I will that's not wrong but enjoyment might mean something slightly different than you're picturing in your mind but what it is you see is that this our God has made this covenant with us and asked us to enter in by faith into that covenant and do you remember singing this morning where the whole realm of nature mine that were an offering far too small love so amazing so divine demands my life my soul my all becoming aware of the commitment that God has made to us in Jesus

Christ does not give us license to go up and behave as we will it demands my life my soul my all and even that must be recognized as a totally inadequate response to the love that God has shown us lovely story in the reader's digest about a man somewhere I think in Indonesia who gave eight cows for his wife have you read that story well perhaps some of you aren't really up on the reader's digest but I'll tell you about it anyway this fellow called Johnny gave eight cows for his wife and this was to the amazement of the whole community and nobody could understand because the wife that they knew that he was bargaining for she sure could have been got for three cows and if he bargained he could have done it for two cows and if he left it a little while till the father got sufficiently anxious he probably could have got her for one cow but he went and he paid eight cows for her and everybody laughed at him and thought what a foolish man he was but he took his wife and he went over to another island and there he got established among his people and the people from whom he took his wife they laughed and laughed at him to have paid eight cows for that girl then the writer went over to visit

[18:13] Johnny and his wife and there he found a beautiful beautiful person and she was beautiful and she was loving and she was gracious and she was all that anybody could ever hope for in a wife and when you asked Johnny why did you pay eight cows he said it was worth it to me and it's a lovely story but you see it's a kind of Bible story because at the basis of what our life is all about is the enormous price that God has paid for us and when you recognize what he's done for you then you will recognize how valuable you are in his son and even as this woman became very beautiful when she was cared for by the husband who thought enough to pay eight cows for her when he could have got her for two when she recognized that the response of her love to him was something which was beautiful to behold and that's the basis on which

God wants to run our world not to force us to behave because he's given up trying to do that and we figured out so many ways not to anyway but he has unconditionally established his covenant of love for us and our response can only be in kind that is we can only love him who has loved us and given himself for us that's what it's all about that's what's at the basis of it all that's why we are members one of another as members of the family of Christ that's why the sign of the covenant is the cross of Jesus Christ the relationship we have between us is on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus Christ the record of the covenant that God has established is written in the book we have our children when we bring them into the covenant we seek in our marriages to reflect the nature of the covenant we remind ourselves by participation in the communion of the promises of the covenant because we are a covenant people in covenant with a covenant making

God and that's to be the basis of our lives I'm going to quit here except for one thing I got a letter this week from a member of this congregation and I must say she has your number our number we know this love but we don't respond very well and we need I guess the work of God's Holy Spirit to bring us to the place of making our whole lives a loving response to the love that God has shown us in Jesus Christ not a response out of fear of tyranny not a response out of the sense of earning or deserving something but a response to that love and that that response is to be corporate for all of us as a congregation for the people that are visitors here today the young people of the diocese the response of your congregation that's to be how we live our lives by deliberately taking upon ourselves a response from my heart and from my life and from whom I am to the love that

God has shown in establishing this new covenant with us being bold enough to say to the likes of you and me I will love you unconditionally do with it what you like but you've got to answer that question amen a good away and can you know I will hear you will in