

Sermon :: 11-Jan-2026
Epiphany I, Year A

“ [let us] keep the COVENANT [we] have made ”

COVENANT. It's a word we're all familiar with ... although perhaps not one we *use* all that often, unless, maybe, we're lawyers drawing up deeds and contracts. It's *also* a word—an *idea*—fundamental to our Christianity. For *COVENANT* is an alternative English translation of the Greek word¹ more commonly rendered in English as *TESTAMENT* ... as in the Old and the New TESTAMENTS: the two 'halves' of our Holy Scripture.²

But *COVENANT* works, *too*—and maybe even works *better*: For a COVENANT is an agreement or a pact ***between*** ... a coming together³ ***of*** ... two parties ... governing how they *will*, and will *not*, act with respect to each another: such as ¶I will never build a factory or a tavern on this parcel of land I'm purchasing from you; or ¶I will "have and ... hold [you] from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death" (BCP, p 427).

And in some ways, *Scripture* is a record of all the COVENANTS *God* makes with *us*, as God's people ... and how *we* go about trying to live *under*—and *up to*—them. In the *Old TESTAMENT*—the *Old COVENANT* ... God makes a *series* of COVENANTS ... of important *promises*:

- to *Noah*, after the flood: never again to wipe humanity from the face of the earth
- to *Abraham*, at his calling: to make him the father of a numerous people and give them a secure home in the Promised Land
- and to *David*, when he had quelled all of Israel's enemies: to establish David's royal line to rule over God's people, forever

And, of course, in the *New TESTAMENT* ... Jesus Himself is God's new COVENANT ... *is* God's new promise ... pact ... concord ... with humanity: He is the *Eternal King* ... the *final-and-forever Sovereign* of the royal line God COVENANTed with David to provide ... but also a king *far, far* beyond any *David* could ever have imagined. For through *this* new King—this new COVENANT ... all our *sins* are *forgiven* ... our 'Edenic' *relationship* with God is *restored* ... and all who profess *faith* in Jesus receive the assurance of *eternal life*, in the infinite love of God. And in a way, Jesus' Baptism in the River Jordan, which we recollect today ... is His royal *crowning* ... His holy *investiture* ... His being divinely *proclaimed*: "This ... *this* ... is My **Son**" ... Whom I've sent to rule and to reign over you ... to forgive and to free you ... to save and to salve you. *This ... He* ... is My *new*—and **final**—COVENANT with *you!* Amen!

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¹ *I.e.*, διαθήκη.

² TESTAMENT can carry connotations of an agreement that speaks after death—as in, "last will and testament": perhaps a notion not altogether out-of-place, given our Easter (post-Cross) faith! The Greek word διαθήκη, which most often was used to signify a WILL, is a translation (in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made in the third / second centuries BCE (and thus, by Jews)) of the Hebrew word for COVENANT, *brit* (בְּרִית), which was more general in meaning and carried no such speaking-after-death connotations. So while Greeks might refer to the Christian Bible's Old and New TESTAMENTS, Jews would probably call them the Old and New COVENANTS.

³ Which is the meaning of the word's Latin root: CON-VENIRE, to come together.

Now, *most* of the COVENANTS God makes in Scripture are *unilateral*: the promise of God, *alone*, to do (or *not do*) something, for *us*. But one of the *most* important COVENANTS God makes with Israel is *bilateral* ... and, just like baptism, it involves passing through water, and into a new life.

You remember the story: After the Israelites leave Egypt and pass through the parted waters of the Red Sea—their *salvation* from bondage and the restoration of God’s promise of an *eternal home* ... God eventually comes to give Moses,⁴ on Mt Sinai, the Torah⁵—the Holy Law—the correct *pathway—the perfect pattern*—for Israel to follow ... *and*, in *return*, [] God asks Israel to *obey* it: to actually *live* by it.⁶

The *parallels* are *obvious*: In our *own* baptisms ... for which, of course, *Jesus’* baptism is the *model*; or, if you will, the *font* (!) ... we are led (symbolically, at least) through the parted waters ... are freed from the bondage of our sins ... and are restored to the promise of an eternal home, in the love of God. The *moment* we are baptized ... whether as an infant, a child or an adult ... *God redeems* us ... *saves* us ... restores us to *oneness* with God ... grants us *eternal life*. In baptism, God sets us upon the *correct pathway—the perfect pattern*: God *COVENANTS* with us that we will live in *full, final* and *forever relationship* with God ... FULL STOP.

But like the COVENANT God makes with Israel at Sinai ... the *baptismal* COVENANT⁷ God makes with each one of us is *bilateral*—includes work for *us* to do, as *well*: In response to the fullness of Christ’s *grace* ... by accepting His *salvation* ... we *also* agree to actually *live* by them: to pursue His *holiness* and take up His *ministry*.

How, you might ask? Well, in vows that we’ll renew again in just a few minutes ... as baptized Christians, we have *COVENANTED* with God:

- To continue in the *learning* and *fellowship* of the Church, and actively participate in its *worship* and in its *praying*
- To persevere in *resisting* what is *evil* ... and as often as we (inevitably) sin, *repent* and turn *again* to the Lord
- To *proclaim*, both with our *lips* and in our *lives*, the Good News of *Christ-among-us*
- To *seek out* and *serve* Christ in *every* person—always loving our *neighbors* as *ourselves*; and

⁴ As the representative of God’s people.

⁵ In particular, the Ten Commandments. But over time, the Holy Law (or Torah) would come to be recognized as the *entirety* of the instructions that God gave to Moses. According to tradition, Moses wrote this down for the people, and it eventually became canonized as the first five books of our Old Testament.

⁶ What God actually says is that God will *bless* the Israelites when they obey the Law, but *curse* them when they don’t (*e.g.*, Deut 28).

⁷ You will not find the *BCP*’s baptismal covenant anywhere in the Scripture (at least not in so many words!). It is an interpretation ... a deeper understanding ... a widened grasp, as it were ... of both the meaning (action) and consequence (obligation) of this Sacrament.

- To strive for *justice* and *peace* among all people ... and to respect the *dignity of every* human being^{8,9}

And the relationship—the holy COVENANT—we enter into with God in our baptism isn't just *bilateral*—a two-way street of receiving and responding ... but also *bicultural*: For God calls us, just as God called Israel, to live under a *higher* law ... to uphold a more *just* ethic ... to meet a more *righteous* standard ... than this world ever asks us to. ¶From the moment we emerge from the Font, we *begin* living in the age of Christ and His perfect Kingdom ... even as we *continue* to slog along in the age of man and its ugly idols and empires. ¶Marked and sealed as Christ's own forever, we plant *one* foot firmly upon the holy shore of the heaven that awaits us ... even as our other foot's sunk up to the ankle in the foul mire of man's own making.

And in this baptismal duality ... this two-lifedness of our faith, if you will ... ¶we promise to use *Jesus* as the 'metric of truth' in our lives ... when so many others hide behind *human* diversions and deceptions. ¶We endeavor to perceive sin as uncomfortable distance from God, to be *overcome* ... when so many others perceive it as power or pleasure, to *revel* in. ¶We commit to *sharing* the joy of Christ ... when so many others don't want to risk offending or being ostracized. ¶We vow to *love* and *serve* our neighbors ... when so many others regard as *weak* or *wasteful* anything that doesn't serve *self* alone. ¶And we vow to seek *Jesus'* justice and pursue *God's* peace: to respect the inherent *godliness*—and thus, *goodness*—of *every* person ... when so many others have appointed themselves judge, jury and prosecutor over the question of who is 'worthy' ... who is 'valuable' ... who 'merits' a *chance* or 'deserves' to *live*,¹⁰ let alone to be *loved*.

Yes, keeping our baptismal COVENANT ... upholding *our* 'end' of the 'salvation bargain' with God ... may make us feel like travelers from a different world: seeking to pull a hellbent culture heavenward ... to turn back the hands of an earth-clock ticking ever toward calamity. But do you know what? I'd wager *Jesus* felt *exactly* the same way. And yet, it was *in* and *through Him*—dissonance, discomfort and *all*—that God selflessly made *God's* new and final COVENANT with *us*.

So in *response* ... let us renew, once again, *our* COVENANT with *God* ... and re-commit to our *keeping* it: in the faith of our eternal salvation, ever secured ... in gratitude for Christ's selfless love, ever outpoured ... and in the assurance of God's goodness toward us and all creatures, ever COVENANTED and ever performed.

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⁸ BCP, pp 304-05. We hear faint echoes of this COVENANT in St Peter's words in the Acts of the Apostles, today ("He commanded us . . ."). (Over the last many decades, there have been efforts to expand these vows, including by adding one explicitly concerning the care of creation; some expansion would, no doubt, be profitable for our perpetual formation as Jesus' disciples.)

⁹ I want to be *crystal clear*: We promise to undertake these obligations in *response to* the grace Jesus bestows upon us in baptism. These vows are *not* a recipe for *keeping* God's favor ... or, for that matter, a perilous pathway to *losing* it ... because, in the New COVENANT—Jesus—God has absolved us of *all* responsibility for procuring our own salvation.

¹⁰ Or live *here*.