

What a Covenant

Isaiah 55:1-9

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From the time of Noah and the Ark, “covenant” has been a key theological word for faith communities. Prior to Noah’s Ark, there was no covenant binding God and humanity together with sacred promises, no clear set of expectations. In short, there was chaos. But at the close of that 40 day flood story, everything changes. God says, “From now on, things will be different. We’ll have a covenant that will bind us together, that will make us accountable, that will be life-giving.” And God placed a rainbow in the sky as a sign of that covenant, of that new way of being in relationship.

To read through the Hebrew Scripture, or the Old Testament as we often call it, is to gain an intimate look into the struggle to keep covenant with God. There are up’s and down’s. There are times of faithfulness to the covenant, and times of disregard for the covenant. God continuously breaks into human history to renew the covenant, to renew the sacred promises God makes to the community, and the promises the community makes to God. Promises are made. Promises are broken. The covenant is renewed again and again.

So, it becomes abundantly clear that God longs to live with us in a covenantal relationship.

In this 55th Chapter of Isaiah’s prophesy, we hear God’s lavish invitation to renew the covenant yet one more time. **“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Ho! You that have no money, come; buy wine and milk without price. Let us make an ever-lasting covenant.”**

The implication is not hard to grasp.

When we are faithful to our covenant with God, we find there is always enough, more than enough, a true abundance.

We, at South Church, are faithful to our covenant with God

when we praise God for the gifts of life and love,

when we thank God for the gifts of food and family,

when we rejoice in God's gifts of creativity and creation.

We, at South Church, are faithful to our covenant with God

when we obey the Great Commandment to love our neighbors.

We are faithful to our covenant with God when we choose to be instruments of peace, when we cooperate with God to mend the brokenness of the world.

Occasionally, I do get to feeling a little blue. And when that happens, I do two things. I look out my office window at the Pre-School next door. I see parents dropping off their children, and I see children running up the ramp, in a hurry to enter that precious zone of learning and exploring and singing and affirming. I see the teachers waiting with open arms and with open hearts. **Through my office window, I see a sacred covenant being kept.** Children are being loved and nurtured. That usually makes my day.

The second thing I do is open my South Church Annual Report to the page where the Missions Team lists all of our mission partners. I read through that list: South Park Inn, Hands on Hartford, Open Hearth, Backpack Program, ABC House, Sioux YMCA, Habitat for Humanity, St. Mary's Orphanage.

And I get this feeling of exhilaration that comes from knowing this church is keeping covenant with God, this church is living up to God's expectations for us, this church is honoring the Great Commandment to love our neighbors. That usually makes my day!

I've been trying to place myself in the congregation of Isaiah's prophetic preaching, trying to imagine what it was like to hear his words so many years ago. People must have been stunned to hear: "Come, you without money, buy wine and milk without money or price." I can hear this collective, "HUH?" Buy something without money? What can we hope to get without money?

My understanding is this: when we keep covenant with God, we receive what could never be purchased in a store or on Amazon.com. We receive an abundance of validation. We receive an abundance of friendship. We receive an abundance of grace. We receive an abundance of hope. We receive an abundance of love. We receive an abundance of joy. We receive an abundance peace!

One of South Church's covenants is with our denomination, the United Church of Christ. This is our church family. Our sister churches stretch from Maine to California, from Florida to Washington State, from Texas to North Dakota. Together, we do God's work in ways that no single church could ever accomplish. Together, we place missionaries in the field. Together, we support struggling churches until they are back on their feet. Together, we respond to natural disasters. Together, we speak our values to elected officials and to other decision makers. Together, we bring people to the table who have never been invited to the table before. When we keep covenant with our sister churches in the United Church of Christ, we find we are living life abundantly.

Now midway through our Lenten journey, let us pray for faithfulness to all the covenants we have made, especially the covenant God has made with us, to be instruments of God's peace where we live and beyond. In the greatest of hope, I say 'Amen.'