

SERMON TITLE: "Our Covenant with God: Covenant Renewal"
SERMON TEXT: Joshua 24:14-28
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 18, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Our First United Methodist beekeepers began selling their 2020 honey products this week. As I paid for my two jars of honey, I was reminded of the covenant relationship our beekeepers established with missionary Mozart Adevu in Ghana, Africa, several years ago. Ever since then, our beekeepers use money from their annual honey sales to help support Mozart's work as an agricultural missionary of the United Methodist Church. Because of that, every time you or I buy honey or a jar of jam or salsa made with honey, or any of the beekeepers' other products, we help Mozart teach his fellow Ghanaians better and more sustainable ways of growing crops, raising farm animals, and keeping bees.

In turn, as our covenant partner, Mozart sends reports to our church every so often, updating us on his missionary work. In his September 14 newsletter, Mozart told about the drought that caused significant agricultural losses in the first growing season this year, and how he is teaching his farmers how to mitigate these effects of climate change. Mozart wrote about two of his students whom he sent to study at an agricultural school in Japan, in the hopes that the younger men will become strong agricultural teachers in their communities. And Mozart told about all their efforts to keep the coronavirus at bay, with social distancing, good hygiene, and nutrition supplements from moringa trees. Mozart asked for all of us covenant partners to hold his work and his people in our prayers.

Covenants are what we're talking about this month. On October 4, we read the story of Noah and the rainbow covenant God made with him. On October 11, we reviewed the story of Abraham and the covenant of dust, stars, sand, and circumcision. And today, we've come to Joshua and the Hebrew tribes. Let's think about their covenant renewal experience. What did it mean for them, and what might it mean for us, to enact a covenant renewal?

1—AN AFFIRMATION OF WHAT GOD HAD DONE FOR THEM

The covenant renewal ratified by Joshua and his people began as an affirmation of what God had done for them. We began our reading this morning in the middle of Joshua, chapter 24. If we go back to the beginning of the chapter, we see Joshua gathering all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, which was one of Israel's most holy places. The elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel all presented themselves there before God.

Joshua wasn't young anymore, and he wanted to make sure the younger generations knew how important this time was. Before he went "the way of all the earth" (23:14), he wanted to remind them of all the good things God had done for them. So Joshua started retelling the story of their ancestors, and how God had called Abraham to migrate from the east side of the Euphrates River into the land of Canaan. There God helped Abraham to prosper and gave him a son Isaac and grandsons Jacob and Esau. After Joseph was taken captive and some of his family migrated to Egypt, the Hebrew people were forced into slavery. But God heard their cries for help, and God sent Moses and Aaron to lead them to freedom through the sea. God supported that great exodus by sending plagues and darkness against the Egyptians, and covering them in water.

God cared for the Hebrews in the wilderness, and then brought them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. According to Joshua, God fought with and for the Israelites against the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Alone, the Hebrews never would have succeeded in all those battles. It was not by the Hebrews' sword or bow that they gained possession of that land of milk and honey. It was God who enabled the Israelites to conquer villages and even the fortified cities like Jericho. Speaking through Joshua, God said, "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant" (v. 13).

Today, we have to seriously wonder about a theology that so clearly implicates God in the genocide of all those native peoples and the theft of their land. But, if we leave that very important conversation for a different time, and take this story as it's presented to us in the Bible, what we hear is an affirmation of God's power and faithfulness to the Hebrew people. As Joshua was nearing his death, and turning over leadership to the next generations, he didn't want them mistakenly to think that their victories and successes were due only to their own efforts. Joshua wanted to make sure they recalled God's strong presence and activity among their people all through the ages. He wanted to make sure they understood that whatever blessings, whatever goodness, whatever resources, and whatever possibilities existed for them existed because of God's steadfast love and covenant.

What I hear in Joshua's words is a call to humble gratitude. Nothing that we have is really ours. Every good thing we have has come to us from God. This is God's part of the covenant renewal.

2—A COMMITMENT OF WHAT THEY WOULD DO FOR GOD

Of course, like we've been saying for the past couple weeks, that covenant of God with the Hebrew people could not just be a one-sided arrangement. Any covenant or covenant renewal has to have at least two partners. Any offer of covenant calls for a response. That's why, in verse 14, Joshua said, "Now, therefore, revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness." Joshua challenged the people to choose, on that day, which god they would serve. Giving strong leadership, Joshua indicated that, as for he and his household, they would serve the Lord.

Over the centuries before, this is the very thing their Hebrew ancestors had done. Noah had agreed to be in covenant with God. Abraham had committed himself and his family to be in covenant with God. Moses too had whole-heartedly given himself to the covenant relationship with God—leading the escape from Egypt, receiving the tablets of the law up on the mountain, and interceding for the people in the wilderness. As the successor to Moses, Joshua had also done his part. He fulfilled the covenant by leading the Hebrews across the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

But now, the people of God were at a new juncture and generation. Now that that they were in possession of this land of milk and honey, it was time to take stock and recommit. No longer could they just unconsciously coast along on the spiritual coattails of their grandparents and parents. They were fully adults, and it was time for them to decide for themselves. It was time for them, personally and thoughtfully, to choose to be a part of this grand salvation of God. It was time for them, tribe by tribe, household by household, and person by person, to confirm and renew their covenant.

Joshua didn't expect that this would be an easy decision. That's why he clearly stated the choices on their spiritual ballot. If they wanted, they could choose to worship the gods of Egypt, from where their people had escaped. Or they could choose to serve the gods which had been worshiped by the native peoples of this new land where they now lived. Joshua knew that both those options would be strong temptations to the Hebrews. Quite possibly, that's what many of them had already been doing, and certainly those would be the easier paths to follow. But Joshua warned them that, if they wanted the blessings and forgiveness of the holy Lord God, then they needed to clearly make that choice. According to verse 23, they would need to put away the foreign gods that were among them, and incline their hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.

This day of decision described in Joshua 24 has been referred to as the "covenant *renewal*" because the content of this covenant was a continuation of the covenant with Moses that came before it. On this day, Joshua was imploring his people to choose to be faithful to God's laws and apply them in this new place and time in which they lived. In verse 25, we see that the covenant renewal included "statutes and ordinances;" and, in verse 26, we see that Joshua wrote in "the book of the law." Fortunately, the Hebrew people were willing to accept Joshua's challenge. Repeatedly, they vowed, "We will serve the Lord!" and "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey."

3—SIGN OF COVENANT RENEWAL

I like that there's a tangible sign in this covenant renewal story. Remember how God's covenant with Noah included a rainbow, and God's covenant with Abraham included the natural and bodily elements of dust, stars, sand, and circumcision? Well, this covenant renewal in Joshua 24 included a large stone. Verse 26 tells us that Joshua took a large stone and set it under an oak tree. Joshua then told the people that the stone would be a witness of the covenant renewal they were making. He said that the stone had "heard" God's words and theirs. Thus it would be a reminder to them to keep their promise.

Every fall, in our church, we also offer a tangible sign of our covenant renewal with God. We call it a pledge card. Putting a financial commitment on paper is our affirmation of humble gratitude for all that God has done for us and provided for us. Filling out and returning a pledge card for the coming year is a witness to our commitment to serve and obey our holy Lord God. And signing a financial pledge to the ministries and mission of First United Methodist Church is a clear way for us to thoughtfully and prayerfully affirm and renew our covenant with God.

CONCLUSION

In this time of COVID uncertainties, I realize it would be the easier path for us not to make any commitments to God for the future. After all, who knows what tomorrow will bring? But I think we need to believe that the God who led our spiritual ancestors through tremendous struggles in the past is quite capable of leading us through this wilderness we're in now. So let's base our actions not on what we can't control, but on what we can. Let's act on hope and faith that our forgiving and loving God will see us through.

In a week or so, we will receive our pledge cards in the mail, and we ask you to return them to the church before November 1, so we can dedicate them in worship that day. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. I hope that you will join me in this act of covenant renewal.