Genesis 12:1-9

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Matthew 26:26-29

*Our Covenant Story*

It’s early in recorded scripture that we begin to hear about God’s covenant with Israel. In fact, Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann call that covenant making “the central and defining theological affirmation of the Old Testament.” What stands out to me is that God is the initiator of covenant – an expression of God’s own resolve to be in relationship. That first covenant simply asks Abram to take his family from Haran to a place God will show him, and if he is faithful God will grant him land and offspring. So off he goes. The journey is not without some bumps along the way, but Abram moves as he is guided. However, offspring haven’t made it on the scene and Abraham fusses, but is assured that part of the promise will happen. And we know the story – in their old age Isaac arrives. I chuckle when Sarah says, “Nothing is impossible with God”.

We know this sense of covenant carries on with Noah and David and there were observances to observe or renew covenant fidelity. It was this kind of covenant renewal that took place in Sinai after the Exodus and it was there that God added the Ten Commandments to the covenant. The first three statements are about our relationship to God and the last six statements are about our relationships with one another – and the kind of “middle” statement is about sabbath. Even God sets work aside on that seventh day. No longer under Pharaohs’ thumb, these commandments were to guide the life of the Hebrew people. Not following these commands would result in serious consequences. We begin to hear about people not following this covenant through the words of prophets like Amos, Hosea and Jeremiah. It is in 587, when the Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, and many are exiled to Babylon that Jeremiah especially mourns the broken relationship with God. One wonders when God will lose patience. The sense that There might be an end to their covenant relationship causes people to think again about their commitment to God and they begin to talk about an ‘everlasting covenant’. From exile the people are speaking of God’s love and trustworthiness. There were some who began to understand as articulated in Micah: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”.

God’s determination to be in relationship comes through in the commitment to find a new way to make the relationship strong. – “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts.” Even forgiving them ~ When will they/we ever learn? But God doesn’t give up –“for God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son” the one who came to show us the way. Even with Jesus walking beside folks, teaching and showing the way – even speaking of the “new covenant” that he embodied – did people understand what God was doing in their midst? I believe some began to understand after his death and resurrection – but the realization was slow to come.

I’m not sure at what point making a covenant became important again – declaring a covenant with other members of your faith community. John Calvin certainly encouraged the practice. An early New England Church Covenant reads:

“Believing in Jesus Christ, the interpreter of God to humankind, we accept his teachings as the guiding principles of our lives and consecrate ourselves and our church to their fulfillment. We, therefore, join in covenant with one another, to worship, work, and serve together that we may express through our church and our individual lives the love and faith taught by Jesus Christ.

Some agreements from that time, such as the Mayflower Compact, while acknowledging that they have come to this new place to advance their Christian faith, are more oriented to how they will be governed in this new place – even acknowledging they are still subjects of the king.

What do we hope a covenant will do? What does it ask of each person? Those ancient covenants told of God’s faithfulness and what, in turn, was expected from the people. How are people being equipped to love and serve God as part of this faith community?

This church, carrying forth the tradition of a Church Covenant, have agreed to the following:

“We as a Congregational Christian church believe that individuals have freedom and responsibility in matters affecting their spiritual life and experience, and that everyone has the right to exercise personal discernment in questions of belief and biblical interpretation. We gather as a church to walk together in the Christian tradition and we seek to be more fully in relationship with God. We embrace all who are called to worship here with our support, prayers, and acceptance. We commit to participate in and support the church and its ministries. We seek the justice and peace of God throughout the world for everyone and all creation.”

This is a covenant we invite new members to share in. As was the case in early churches, members would be invited to renew the covenant each year as they committed to work together for a new year. In these strange times, I invite you to consider your covenant too.