

Sermon: Feb. 22nd of 2015 – St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Owen Sound, Ont.

Called to Covenant

Promises, promises, promises.

Every day we hear of promises. Promises made to one another, promises made by politicians, marriage vows, the Scout promise.

I've promised to call someone.... Need a round tuit!

Mike Harris promised all the provincial downloading would be cost neutral for the municipalities – pinky swear! 20 years later it's still not balanced out!

Dalton McGuinty promised he wouldn't raise taxes – then introduced the Health "premium".

As for marriage vows, at the risk of offending anyone here today, we all know someone who has been unable to keep that one! I myself know someone who has more than twice as many sister-in-laws as he does brothers!

And I'll get to the Scout Promise a little later.

So today's message is about a promise made, that promise sustained and renewed, and that promise being kept, now and forever. God's covenant with his people thru the ages.

When I told Rev. Dana what I would be talking about today, this covenant idea, she loaned me a book that explores the idea and breadth of God's covenant(s) with his people over the ages. And it does so in remarkable detail, far beyond my ability to digest and comprehend in a week of preparation for this service. The book is called **The Christ of the Covenants**, written by **O. Palmer Robertson**. No, I'd never heard of him either, so don't feel bad.

Now before I get into what a covenant is, and it is far more than just a promise, let's look at what it is not. A covenant is not a contract. We are used to hearing about contracts. I myself, am involved with trying to get a contract with my employer as a member of my union. A contract is something negotiated and agreed to between parties. A contract can be broken if either party fails to meet their obligations as laid out in the contract. And many if not most contracts contain escape clauses. A covenant in the biblical context is an unbreakable commitment that God makes out of his steadfast love, rooted solely in the grace of God Almighty, as our loving Father, not in what we might think we deserve in this arrangement.

Getting back to Mr. Robertson's exploration of covenants:

Within the first couple of chapters of this book there emerges a type of definition of what a covenant is. Robertson "defines" it as a bond in blood, sovereignly administered!?!?!? What?

He refers to it as “A blood oath!” What? To explain this Robertson highlights a number of practices of ancient times that involved cutting apart animals in sacrifice and ritual as part of invoking and reminding people of covenants that God had made with his people. To bring that idea a little closer to current times, with the Scouts, Cubs, Beaver, and Rovers here, and some of you who are older like me, you may remember pocket knives, and you may remember when you were young, you and your best friend may have done something crazy (you never told your mothers) like a small cut in your thumb, and pressed your cut thumbs together, to seal a promise. To the ladies, if that is too much of a guy thing, I apologize!

So this idea of covenant is a commitment of one party to another, a commitment that establishes a relationship between the two parties, and the blood part is to indicate that these commitments have life and death consequences. And when we talk about covenants with respect to the Holy Word of God, then we are talking about commitments made between God himself, and his people, and of course God is our sovereign and he is the one who sets the terms and conditions.

This covenanting thing is not a once off. Rather, it begins in Genesis 3: 14 – 19 where God begins his commitment to redeem humanity, his creation of those created in his own image, to oneness with himself in spite of the sin which has separated them. He establishes a **covenant of redemption** between himself as the creator of all, and Adam and Eve and their descendants.

When things got too messed up by these early humans, God follows this up with a flood. Kinda like a reboot of the hard drive on your computer! Our first scripture passage, Genesis 9: 8 – 17, describes for us a second covenant that God established between himself as the creator, and Noah, his descendants, and all living creatures, for all time. Verse 11 – Never again will floodwaters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth. And then he gave us a sign that occurs regularly, even to this day, to remind himself and us of this covenant. He confirms his **redemption covenant** by establishing his **preservation covenant** with Noah, symbolized by the rainbow, that mankind would not be destroyed, but preserved on this earth so that they, and we could be redeemed.

Subsequent covenants are established with Abraham to set apart a chosen people as per Genesis 15, and the blood oath part is reinforced in Chapter 17: 10 - 14 of the same book of Genesis. Another is established with Moses where God provides instruction to the people with whom he has already established his **redemption covenant** so there is clear understanding of what is required in response to the covenant – the 10 commandments and the myriad laws of the ancient faith. This is God confirming his covenant to redeem fallen man through his chosen people, to redeem His people to oneness with himself by establishing laws for his chosen people to live by that would clearly set them apart from the rest of mankind. Refresh your

memory by reading Exodus chapters 19 – 24, and the book of Deuteronomy. Remember God as sovereign administers the covenant, setting the terms and conditions.

We hear again of God's **redemption covenant** with us in II Samuel Chapters 5 – 7 when he establishes his kingdom on earth by placing David on the throne in Jerusalem, and promising that redemption would ultimately come through a descendant of King David, a baby born of a virgin mother, our eternal King. And this **covenant of kingdom** is celebrated in song in Psalm 89.

Now for those of you who have read this wondrous book, the BIBLE, you may recall that in time the kingdom of David also fails in a human sense, and Jerusalem is destroyed as is the Holy Temple that had been built as the House of God.

But you have to remember that the "**kingdom covenant**" contained two parts, the second being the promise of redemption, through a heavenly kingdom established by and through a descendant of King David. Thus we have the **final covenant, the consummation** as spoken in Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34 where that descendant of David is born in a stable to Mary and Joseph.

Christ is the fulfillment of all the covenants, and the consummation of the ultimate blood oath. It's through the sacrifice of his very life, as a lamb to the slaughter, tortured and hung on a cross that the blood seals the final covenant. God himself has redeemed us to oneness with himself.

The passage from Mark tells us how Jesus was baptized, not to wash away his sins, but rather to demonstrate the baptism of the Holy Spirit, perfecting the trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. He received the affirmation from his Father that we all desire, "You are my beloved Son (or daughter), and you bring me great joy!" Like the 40 days of Lent that started this past Tuesday with the Pancake Supper, he endured the 40 days in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan himself. But this is the beautiful part, and it is equally true for us today. The angels took care of him. And following that he preached the good news that the covenant was fulfilled.

As Peter's letter spells out, Christ died for our sins, our inability to keep up our end of the agreement. He was sinless, and yet as the sacrifice, took our sins upon himself to free us, to bring us home to God. He died in the flesh, but at that death he was reborn in the eternal Holy Spirit of God himself, reunited with his Father. Peter's letter spells out as well the connection to Noah and that preservation covenant. But now like Christ in the Jordan, the water isn't for washing away our sins, but rather to enable us to stand before God as sinless, with a clear conscience, choosing to be home with God, due to Christ's sacrificial death.

So what is our response to this call to Covenant with God? Why are you here today? Are you here to respond to that invitation, that call to Covenant? You have been freed by the blood shed by the sacrificial lamb as part of the blood oath, freed to choose. To choose the baptism described by Peter, to be redeemed to oneness with God, to be united with God, the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

We make choices every minute of every day, who to associate with, what to learn, where to go, what to read, to see, to hear, to do.

Last week Rev. Dana spoke of the Glory Light that shone through Jesus at his Transfiguration. She asked “have you, or can we see that light today?” I would answer yes we have, and yes we can. We can let that Glory Light shine through us when we choose to be Christ to one another, when we touch one another with love, when we see one another as sons and daughters of God, when we hear the cry for love and respond, when we feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless, and help to the sick. We can’t all be Mother Teresa amongst the outcasts of India’s slums, but we can all respond as the Scouts do by adopting the promise as your daily commitment . So those of you who are Scouts, those of you who have been Scouts, and those of you who support the Scouts please join me in reciting...

The Scout Promise

On my honour,
I promise that I will do my best
To do my duty to God and the Queen,
To help other people at all times,
And to carry out the spirit of the Scout Law.

The Scout Law

A Scout is:
Helpful and trustworthy,
Kind and cheerful,
Considerate and clean,
Wise in the use of all resources.

And may the Glory Light shine through us all as we “do our best”

Amen