

Dancing in the Shadow of the Covenant Message for July 12, 2009

David danced.

He stripped down to a girded cloth and threw his whole heart into a crazy, emotion-filled dance of joy before God and the people of Jerusalem. After many years of struggle, starvation, homelessness and war, in spite of questionable decisions and acts done at the hands of David as he evolved into the leader of the people, the Ark of the Covenant had finally been brought to Jerusalem, and it was time to celebrate with song, with food, with hope.

Can you imagine the joy the people felt on this day? This was no ordinary stick of furniture! This was THE Ark – the one constant piece of real estate the Jews had been hauling around for hundreds of years as they wandered through deserts and fought wars. It contained the very core of their belief system, and precious symbols of God's covenant with them: the holy words on two tablets, Aaron's miracle-performing rod, and manna, the food which kept them alive during long, dry periods. To them, the Ark was God, and God had come home.

No wonder David danced!

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the word, "covenant."

I remember the first time I heard it – I was in Sunday school in Illinois, and it was attached to another word – ark. One Sunday, we learned about something called the Ark of the Covenant. It seems to me we all were just a little confused, because we thought an ark was a giant boat that Moses built – but this ark apparently was a box of some kind, and inside it lived some flat rocks with writing on them, and it was kept in a special place, and no one was supposed to see it or touch it except really holy people like priests. That's right, isn't it?

Since those innocent days, I've learned that the word "covenant" carries some serious responsibility. Its origin is Middle English, from "covenir" to agree. Today, in its noun form, the word covenant is synonymous with the words commitment, guarantee, pledge, promise. As a verb, it means to agree, to determine, to put together. This is all good, but I decided I'd better dig deeper into its meaning in the languages of the original writings of the Bible – I discovered some information about the Hebrew used in the Old Testament and Greek in the New.

Many scholars believe the Hebrew word, "berith," which shows up nearly 300 times in the Old Testament, is derived from an equivalent Assyrian word which means "to bind" or "to fetter." Commonly used in Old Testament times between people (for business and relationship agreements such as for marriage), berith implied a contractual, agreeable arrangement, intended to respect the needs of both parties. This included agreements between friends, tribes, kings and of course, men and women in the covenant of marriage.

Some scholars believe that God's covenant with us is reflected in two different interpretations of this arrangement: the first is similar to that of a conquering ruler, who offers protection to the dethroned ruler, if that person promises to pledge allegiance and loyalty to the conqueror. No negotiation is possible here – the loser takes what he is offered – and is seemingly happy to get it.

While we don't often think of God as a conqueror, we could make a case for the feeling that God is definitely the greater being, watching over us, and only asking for loyalty, etc, in return for his love

and protection. We don't negotiate how this goes – we just live as we're told. It's a pretty fair arrangement.

The second interpretation refers to our covenantal relationship with God as more of a marriage agreement...a legally binding one between God and us, based on a contract, of sorts. God offers us partnership with Himself – and it's up to us to buy into it. When we remember the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments, this actually makes some sense!

No wonder David danced! God followed through on the covenant, and with David as the proclaimed ruler, the people could begin to work together under God's watchful and protective eye, and truly live in the Promised Land.

The concept of covenant as used in the New Testament, however, becomes a little more complicated. Two words might have been applied to God's covenant through Jesus. The word, "suntheke" meaning compact, treaty, or alliance - would have been a good choice if interpreters were looking for similarities with the Hebrew "berith."

But Greek translators chose instead to use the word "diatheke" in place of berith; meaning "testament" or "will," as in, dispensing knowledge or wealth, from the top, down. This works: Jesus was given to us by God as a living covenant – proof of God's love – and we inherit the benefits of this arrangement.

Bottom line: whether it means God's promise or the disposition of God's will, there are similarities in that the word covenant, when used in the Bible, is (as one resource puts it) "sealed by a sacrifice or by death, and in both cases, the recipient may not negotiate or alter the stipulations." We take what we get – and if we're smart – we're thankful to get it.

At least, this is what one source explained. Maybe this should be the next adult class, because the whole notion of Covenant connects to all parts of our faith. I was able to also read about the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of Redemption, promissory covenant and obligatory covenant – all linked to biblical references – and all pointing to some connection we have with God and Jesus that we should take seriously, because in the United Church of Christ, the word covenant is a cornerstone of who we are and what we believe.

I suppose the word "covenant" is fresh on my mind because it was at the center of much of the activity both in the History and Polity class I attended and during the General Synod. In *our* history, Covenant begins with a boatload of 102 Pilgrims who, on a two-month journey across the ocean, recognized that the group about to set foot on New England was a real mixed bag of immigrants, and they figured that they better come up with some way to live together.

In November of 1620, disagreements related to the legality of settling in New England (instead of Northern Virginia, the original destination) caused some passengers to question the authority of the group's leaders. The Pilgrims drew up an agreement that the passengers would "covenant and combine our selves together in a civil body politic." That agreement, known as the "Mayflower Compact," was signed on November 21, 1620.

Originally called, "an association agreement," this document of Polity served as the governing guide for nearly a year until the "Pierce Patent" was put in its place – an official recognition by the King of England which gave them permission to govern themselves.

Forty-one men signed the Mayflower Compact – including John Alden, whose descendents helped create our Constitution. This body of Puritan Pilgrims was known as “Congregationalists,” people who wanted to maintain Anglican Church identity in some fashion, but who also wanted each congregation to control its own affairs. Sound familiar? Since there were no bishops or other church leaders in the group, the Congregationalist viewpoint and methods of governing prevailed with many groups who arrived after that first brave batch of colonists. And at the center of their trials and tribulations in establishing New England was the covenant each person had with one another and with their God.

Hundreds of years later, in the United Church of Christ, we still recognize the importance of how this idea of Covenant should work.

During the General Synod, I observed many hours of intense discussion related to what from the outset should have been a simple and obvious change in our governance: the workings of the whole-church United Church of Christ is very large and very cumbersome and a proposal was set out years ago to reduce the number of participants and try to streamline things. To a newcomer like me, movement in this direction is a realistic solution; however, as I quickly learned, several groups of people within our church body believed they had not been consulted or represented fairly with the new proposed arrangement. They were vocal about it – clearly, they felt rejected, betrayed, neglected and angry at how the process had passed them by.

But, the sense of covenant we share in the UCC quietly held its ground – moderators of this gathering respectfully allowed for open discussion by these groups during assembly meetings – often, the air was filled with tension and the strain of acknowledging uncomfortable truths to some of the accusations. It seemed as though, by honest oversight, the group who designed the resolution may not have considered how all people in the UCC would be impacted; and they knew something had to be done because our covenant to one another states “that all may be one.” Delegates who were to make recommendations to the General Synod the following day listened to each comment, and realized they had their work cut out for them as they later crafted another version of the resolution which would be acceptable to those who felt left out.

In the end, the newly written resolution passed – during the next two years, our church will begin to rethink and redesign its structure. There are still wounded folk in our body, and there is need for more discussion about how to prevent this type of exclusion from happening again, but that basic belief in our promises to serve one another in the name of God held fast, and like David, we celebrated God’s love and guidance at our final worship. Like David, we aren’t a perfect body in God, but we recognize our weaknesses and place our hopes in the promises God has made to us. We know God loves us and wants us to be Jesus to one another, and so that night, we danced in the shadow of the Covenant.

I’m learning, friends, that some words carry incredible weight when I put them to what I believe and wish for our church. Covenant is clearly one of them. You have made a covenant with me - you recognize and accept me as I am, you’ve given me the gift of trust, and freedom to work for God on your behalf – and you also believe that together, we can do God’s work.

While we don’t have a special box on our worship table that houses the Ten Commandments, I know the presence of a loving God has come again to live in our church. I feel that sense of joy that binds us together, and I know we are in the process of creating a home for all who want to know the same feelings of acceptance and hope.

Covenant lives at First Congregational Church.

God is in this place – God is in our hearts – God has kept the promise to be with us always.

Amen.