

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 1, 2020

Claim the Covenant

Joshua 24:1-28

As the people arrived at Shechem, ushers were handing out bulletins, welcoming everyone to the service of covenant renewal. Joshua would lead the service, though as always, God was the primary presence and actor in the assembly. In fact, the first major portion of the service was devoted to hearing from the Lord, who reminded the people of his faithfulness throughout the story of their salvation. He was the one who had first called Abraham and gave him many descendants. He was the one who brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. He was the one who had patiently led and provided for his people as they wandered in the wilderness all those years. He was the one who had brought them to the Promised Land and enabled them to inhabit it.

By the time the Lord has finished speaking, there's no doubt about the source of Israel's life and purpose—past, present, and future. The whole story is about God's presence with and action on behalf of the people. Without that, there would be no reason for the people to gather.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing for the people to do. Joshua, whom God has used to help get the people to this point in their journey, issues the invitation, telling the worshipers to claim their story by remembering who God is and who they are. And who they are is determined by whom they worship and serve. They and their ancestors already have experience with what it's like to backslide and give their loyalty to false gods that don't really have the power to save. But now is the time and here is the place to toss aside their idols and lay hold of the Lord, who has already done so much for them. In fact, Joshua answers his own altar call by declaring that he and his family will be loyal to God, and to God alone.

Joshua's conviction and commitment are contagious. The people start coming forward in huge numbers. There aren't enough deacons to handle all the folks who want to rededicate their lives to the Lord. The musicians lead the congregation in verse after verse of additional invitation hymns, so that everyone who wants to walk the aisle gets an opportunity. Even those who are still in the pews start shouting, "We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God" (v. 18).

Keep in mind the folks who comprised this community of faith. These are second-generation Israelites. The book of Joshua narrates a transitional period in the story of God's saving purposes. Moses, who had led first-generation Israel out of Egypt and had mediated the covenant given to the people at Mount Sinai, has died. The Lord appointed Joshua to succeed Moses and lead the next generation of Israelites into the Promised Land. So the folks assembled in today's text are the children of that first generation of God's people.

It's therefore important that they realize the gravity and demands of the faith that has been passed on to them. They can't just rest on their religious heritage and assume that all is well for them simply because their ancestors were claimed and rescued by God. God's

covenant isn't to be taken casually or lightly. This is deeply serious business. This helps us understand Joshua's dialogue with the people, even after they've declared their allegiance to God. Sure, they've come forward and said they too will serve the Lord. But Joshua knows their history of disobedience. He knows how prone they are to profess their faith yet slide right back into the same patterns of unholy behavior. So Joshua takes some time to challenge the people. He tells them to count the cost of faithfulness to God. He reminds them that they're signing on to a covenant with a God who is holy and jealous, who doesn't take sin lightly, and who won't settle for lip service.

After hearing Joshua's warnings, the people still answer, "We will serve the Lord." Only then does Joshua proceed with the renewal of their covenant with God. In that day and time, a religious covenant bore a resemblance to a political treaty, which meant there needed to be witnesses to the agreement. In this case, Joshua identified two witnesses. First, the people themselves, and secondly a large stone that he set up at Shechem. Then Joshua spelled out the covenant requirements in writing. Putting these things down in print, coupled with the stone and the people's own words, would be an enduring reminder to the people about what they had promised.

That's the nature of a covenant. A covenant binds two parties together in mutual promises. We don't use the language of covenant as much in contemporary culture. But one of the places where we do meet this kind of language is in the context of marriage, particularly the wedding ceremony. A man and woman pledge themselves to one another through promises made in the presence of God and the assembled congregation, the witnesses. These promises unite the two of them in a lifelong relationship of love, a relationship designed to reflect the character of God.

The God who was faithful to his people Israel, and has revealed his faithfulness to the world through Jesus Christ, is a God who makes and keeps promises. And when we as his people in Christ pledge our love and loyalty to God and to one another, and keep our pledges through lives of devotion, we embody the will and way of God. As writer and speaker Lewis Smedes once put it:

Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God.¹

Smedes means that in our own covenant faithfulness, we simply reflect God, not that we take on the role of God or do what only God can do. Recall that in their covenant renewal service, the Israelites first listened as God retold the story of their salvation, with the accent on "I." I called Abraham. I rescued you from Egypt. I guided you in the wilderness. I brought you into the Promised Land. No one could walk away from that worship service thinking that salvation was their own doing. It was all God's doing.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing for you and me to do. True, the God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, reminds us of his mighty work for us. I've come to you in loving mercy. I've rescued you from bondage to sin and death. I've forgiven you and made you new. I've promised you a home in my eternal reign. I've called you and claimed you as my people in Christ. But now, what are you going to do with that claim? How are you going to respond to it? Whom will you choose to serve?

One pastor tells about about traveling in Ghana, and learning that in the country's dominant language, the only way to ask, "What is your religion?" is to ask, "Whom do you serve?" Christian faith isn't primarily about denominational affiliation, or religious heritage, or confessing a particular creed, or going through the formalities and procedures of church life. It's first and foremost about what God has done for us through Christ, and what you do with what God has done. It's about taking responsibility for your relationship with God. It's about embracing the Lord for yourself. It's about binding yourself to God who has bound himself to us. It's about making the Lord your God, and making the church your people. And how much you do these things will be revealed by how you offer the Lord your whole self, and devote yourself to serving him faithfully, across time and circumstance.

John Wesley, one of the key figures in the Methodist tradition, had a prayer that he cherished and used. It's sometimes recited in special worship services, but is also a wonderful expression for individuals who want to affirm or reaffirm their commitment to the Lord. A modern version of this covenant prayer goes as follows:

I am no longer my own, but yours.
 Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
 Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
 exalted for you or brought low for you.
 Let me be full, let me be empty.
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
 I freely and willingly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.
 And now, glorious and blessed God,
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 you are mine and I am yours.
 So be it.
 And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.
 Amen.

In addition to prayers, the Lord has given us his table, prepared for us again today. The bread and cup are a sign and reminder of the new covenant that we affirm in Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God has redeemed us and bound us to himself. So by eating and drinking together, we renew our promises to the Lord and to each other. We pledge again our loyalty to God, and renew our commitment to serve him.

¹ Lewis Smedes, "The Power of Promises," in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today's Preacher*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) n.p.