

Sunday October 31, 2021  
Lesson 9: Covenant Renewal  
Scripture: Deuteronomy 29: 10-29

**Context:**

The 2021 fall series is titled “Belong.” Each unit will focus on a way the people of God are called to seek community and discover how God has connected us to one another. Today we continue to unpack the unit titled “Into the Future,” an exploration of the early church’s foundations and a call to return to our roots for renewal. This lesson “Covenant Renewal” explores how Moses led the people to see a need for covenant renewal, and thus how the church needs to seek the same as well.

The lesson comes from the book of Deuteronomy, a book often known as part of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Continuing themes in earlier books, Deuteronomy chronicles the leadership of Moses. The book has a distinct genre: it is a farewell address, in which a notable leader speaks to his constituents before his death.<sup>1</sup> The section we read today comes from part of the final farewell speech attributed to Moses as he counsels the Israelites on how to live. These words come before his death in chapter thirty-four, where Moses is buried after receiving an opportunity to see the Promised Land.

An important focus of the text is on Moses and how he has led the people. Like most leaders, Moses is a controversial figure. He had people who rebelled against him, he sometimes stumbled in his leadership, and he had a past. The cumulative portrait we get of Moses is of a reluctant, but gifted leader.<sup>2</sup> He struggles with God and yet God continues to work through him to lead God’s people.

His farewell address covers some of the main issues the Israelites had with Moses. As he found in his time with them, they could not focus on the Promised Land. Instead, all they could do was think of Egypt and reflect on the pretty gold and silver idols there. They were not content to wonder about new possibilities and wanted comfort. They forgot about the covenant God had made with them.

In this farewell discourse, Moses reminds them of all that God has done and all that God will continue to do. They are not to look back, but instead are called to look forward. They must see how God will lead them to the Promised Land and their children will reap the benefits. They are to remember the vows God made with them and how it is time for them to remember their vows. They are to be God’s people, the ones chosen by God to live and honor the Lord their God.

The God of the Israelites is the God of all. This God does not require them to build idols or make human sacrifices. Instead, this God blesses them and asks them to seek ways to love God and to love one another. They are to remember God as the one who is the giver of life, and has called them by name as a royal priesthood of people, set

---

<sup>1</sup> Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 178.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 190.

aside for the world. They are to go on and see what God has in store in front of them.

### **Application**

What terms or images comes to mind when you hear the word “covenant”? Some of you might think of the rainbow, a symbol of God’s promises found in the story of Noah in Genesis. Or maybe you think of King David, who stood before the Lord and heard of the covenant for him and his lineage.

When I think of the word covenant, I see two things. The first is the chalice and paten with a delicate white cloth dropped over them and the words “Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.” The second is a composition of images, a recollection of an event I’ve attended almost yearly. I see the pristine stained-glass windows and hear the beautiful choir accompanied by a pipe organ. I watch as a group of robed individuals step up to be commissioned or ordained and I see those in the pews respond with enthusiasm to their call as well. The scene is of the ordination service of the United Methodist Church when both the church and those called to God to ordained ministry make vows to be in covenant with our God.

I hope you have something you associate with covenant. Hopefully you have seen how your life is connected to a covenant with God. Whether it is the vows you make when you join a church, or when you receive or participate in either of our two sacraments in the United Methodist Church, I hope you feel the power of the words and the marvel to come with having our God who has claimed you by name.

As we read today’s passage, we are reminded of how we need a constant reminder of the covenant we have with God. Moses for years had led God’s people, and they constantly forgot the covenant. Yet true to who God is and what God does, God did not abandon or move the covenant to a contract.

The farewell discourse of Moses points the people of God to see how they now will have to continue the covenant work. No one will do it for them. They are called to see how God has reached out to them and they are now called to respond to the vows they made and the privilege God has given them as God’s people.

Before we criticize the Israelites for their wayward behavior, or for their complaining and moaning, we might need to take a hard glance in the mirror. We too have been given an opportunity to make our vows and covenant with God. And from time to time, we forget those vows and we stray from God and the church.

It happens when we least expect it and we might even find good reasons to justify the abandonment of the covenant. Someone else started a fight so we decided to escalate or throw a temper tantrum to get our way. We want to have power and control so we do anything it takes to get there including lying or deceiving others to receive what we covet. And as I was reminded in recently watching the animated Cinderella, “Just because it’s what done doesn’t mean it’s what should be done!”

No one starts out saying they’re going to openly defy the covenants they’ve made. Instead, it becomes more of a process and incremental. Just ask the Israelites. They blamed Moses for not being clear. They said Aaron let them do it, so why not. Everyone else worshipped idols, so why shouldn’t they. Their future generations can clean up whatever mess they make.

Think about your own covenants. Are you faithful in them? For example, when it

comes to baptizing people into the faith, do you welcome them and pray for them? We all love baptizing people and yet if we look at the words, we should also shiver a bit. We are called to welcome that person as a part of the body of Christ and the moment goes beyond just a pretty pic to put on social media.

When it comes to the church, are you faithful to the vows you made? Clergy who made vows to the United Methodist Church are told to go where they are sent. They are called to be loyal to the church and no join or start another denomination while in the United Methodist Church. Laity join them in that call and vow to both support and walk with the clergy as they lead. Do you, if you're a pastor, uphold the vows you make and remain faithful to the United Methodist Church? And if you are laity, do you stay faithful to the United Methodist Church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?

Covenant is a beautiful thing. And yet it is also a challenge. It flies in the face of a world, which values contracts and transactional living. A covenant life with God calls for faithfulness, obedience, and loyalty.

What images of covenant come to your mind? What are the covenants you find yourself a part of? Why do you think God continues to be faithful in covenants despite the sins of humanity? How can you revisit and remember the vows of covenant you have made? Who are the people you look towards in discerning how to keep covenants?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh  
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge  
PO Box 71  
Brantley, AL 36009