

There's surely a wife out there who's thinking, "I am so discouraged: this man I am married to will never be able to love me the way I need to be loved—not even bare minimum. I would like to get a divorce and start over with a better man who really loves me." But she doesn't: she remembers the promise she made, and chooses to try to make her marriage work.

There's surely a dad out there thinking, "I wish my daughter would finally get out of this house and never come back. She has broken our hearts and made stupid decisions for so long now I just want it all to go away." But he remembers the promise he made to her the day she was born, and decides to continue to love and support her as best he can.

There's surely a pastor out there (I thank God not in here) thinking, "I am ready to chuck this whole thing and go find a line of work that pays in something beside frustration. No matter what I do or say or how hard I work they never improve." Then she remembers the promise she made to God at her ordination and decides to continue to be the best pastor she can be—at least for God's sake.

There are surely church members out there thinking, "I am more than ready to check out some other more interesting congregations. The pastor is getting weak, the people are petty, and if this is supposed to be the closest we come to heaven, it's not nearly close enough for me." Then they remember their promise, and vow again to become part of Christ's solution for His church rather than remaining part of the problem.

There are surely people out there—and in here—who still make and keep their promises. They—many of you—have promised not to quit when things get hard; they—you—promised not to give up even when they really didn't feel like redoubling their efforts. They—you—still dare to make and keep sacred promises—covenant promises. In this you share something of the nature of God.

Making and keeping promises is, paradoxically, one of the ways we become more free. It's one of the ways we grow into our God-given destiny, who we were created to be. When you make a promise you make an uncertain future more certain. Fashions change, Administrations come and go, the stock market goes up and down—but when you make and keep your promises, you are declaring you will not allow fates or problems or accidents or moodswings to dictate the course of your life. You will not sacrifice a loving relationship because your subconscious is acting up again. You will not become so much seaweed floating along the crests and troughs and tides of fate. When you make and keep covenant promises, you become more free to realize your own future.

In *A Man for All Seasons*, the memorable play (and movie) about Sir Thomas More, that martyr imprisoned for his faith and his integrity was rotting away in the dungeon. His daughter Meg was begging him to save his life by breaking a promise he had made. His resolve shows us how risky it is to break one's promise—no matter how risky it is to keep it. Sir Thomas More answers, "Ah, Meg...when a man takes an oath he holds his own self in his hands, like water, and when he opens his hands he need not hope to find himself again."

When we let go our sacred promises, we let go of ourselves. Who knows when or how, but by the grace of God, we might ever find ourselves again? When we keep our promises, we know who we are. We never stopped.

[In this paradox of freedom, we share also in the nature of God. In keeping covenant promises, we freely choose to limit our freedoms—and enter into the possibilities of greater relationships, greater love, and a greater future. (God chooses freely to set aside the divine power and authority in order to allow us freely to behave as we choose; we often do choose to live even in open rebellion against God. This freedom God with which He has endowed us is a mark of God’s love for us and trust in us. In this same way—by keeping our promises even when things in relationship seem to go sour—we choose, for love and for a greater future, to limit our own future freedoms in order to be there for and with the person who trusts us to keep our promise.)

(G K Chesterton observed “The person who makes a vow makes an appointment with himself at some distant time and place and he gives up his freedom in order to keep the appointment.” [Quoted in Lewis Smedes’ thoughtful work in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, Eerdmans, to whom I am indebted for several of my insights.]

Every relationship worth having—marriage, civil union, family, congregation, country—in fact the future of all the world and every one of us in it depends on covenant promises made, covenant promises kept. Whether like the dinosaurs we all perish in a stupefying vapor of climate change or pollution; whether we get taken out by a wayward asteroid as in a bad sci-fi latenight rerun; whether we all get wiped out by a global flood (nope, that’s one cataclysmic scenario we don’t have to worry about: remember God made a covenant with Noah that would never happen again)—whatever may happen in this world, our everlasting hope depends upon the covenant promise of God. That is, whether the human race have any hope whatsoever beyond our earthly lifespan of threescore and ten (or so)—everything depends upon covenant promise made and kept.

This is a timely topic this week, this talk of keeping promises. (The realm of politics illustrates the same theme in a different way.) We’re learning the hard way that a nation becomes virtually ungovernable when we lose faith in our leaders and in one another. Many angry American voters are convinced the Bush Administration did not keep their promises; many are convinced Wall Street financiers and mortgage lenders did not keep their tacit promises; many are convinced those in the Senate who accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars each in campaign funds from those they were pledged to oversee did not keep their promises. Every election cycle including last week, statewide initiatives involving everything from mass transportation to new school bonds to prisons to drug rehab program to public employee funding to alternative energy funding—initiatives which may be otherwise worthwhile—get nixed by the voters because there is so little trust that taxpayer funds will be used or even accounted for responsibly by those in Sacramento.

If we do not make and keep promises, then human community at every level becomes strained and finally impossible. We as Americans have inherited a unique legacy from brave women and men who have paid the highest price even in blood so that we might still enter into covenant promise with other citizens—at this point I am so grateful to those signers of the Declaration of Independence who took such mortal risk in promising “upon our fortunes, our lives, our sacred honor.” (Remember Ben Franklin’s famous quip: “we must hang together or we will surely hang separately.”) Apart from a common vision, apart from promises made to each other, a community or clan or nation degenerates into a competitive arena of everyone “looking out for number one.” My fear for our nation extends to the fact that we are learning, gradually and now more suddenly,

that there are not and cannot be enough lawyers or police officers or new laws or regulators or compliance departments or watchdog agencies to maintain a sense of community or liberty once we fail to keep our word to one another. Once we become untrustworthy and untrusting, genuine human community vanishes.

The everlasting hope of the world, and each one of us in it, began when that Chaldean named Abram dared to trust in Someone making him a promise: “Keep going from your land and your father’s house to the land I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, so that...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” [Gen 12:1-3] For whatever reason, Abram and Sarai (later re-named Abraham and Sarah, as you know) decided to trust the One who made that improbable promise.

We just heard the summary of the “call” of Moses, born into that tribe of covenant people, the Israelites, at a time when God had already been keeping with them the covenant of Abraham for three times as long as the USA has been a nation. God had already been faithful for a long time! Every child in our Sunday School knows the story: there was Moses out watching his flocks in the desert when his attention is caught by a burning bush which won’t, for some reason, burn up. God has not forgotten His covenant promise; God has heard the cries of His people, slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God plans to take action and do something about it. That is, God plans for Moses to do something about it.

Moses, remembering his face is on all the “wanted” posters on all the post offices back in Egypt for his past murder of a law enforcement officer, is understandably not eager to “jump!” when he hears this divine command. “Why me?” he asks. But God promises, “I will be with you, Moses.” [This detail might provide some small consolation to those of you who are perpetually late turning in your covenants, though it does complicate things for our trustees: Moses was not so quick to respond, either.]

Naturally, Moses asked, “Come on, Whoever you are. If I were to go back to my people, they’d only ask, ‘You and whose god are going to take on Pharaoh? What is the name of the God you tell us is sending you?’ A little help here, please. I’m going to need some I.D.”

At this, God answered Moses with the divine name, defying translation and interpretation—those four Hebrew consonants often rendered “I AM,” or “I am who I am,” or “I am who was, who is, and who will be” or simply “Yahweh” or “Jehovah.” Not much definitive help from the Bible scholars. But Moses was not a philosopher or Bible scholar.

What he needed to know is what you and I need to know. What you need to know before you allow your little children to spend the night for a sleepover; what you need to know before someone else is going to be driving your teenager to school; what you need to know before you ask her to marry you, or say “Yes.”

Moses needed to know one thing: could this Voice be trusted? Could Moses risk his life accepting the promise of this God?

Fortunately God knew exactly what Moses needed; one accurate translation of the name God reveals to Moses would be “I Am the One Who Will Be There Right with You.” Here is God’s I.D.: “the One who makes and keeps sacred promises.” (God reiterates, in case we missed: “This is My name, My nature, forever.” [v 15] “I will keep My covenant promises forever.”)

Moses decided he could trust this Promise-keeping God, and as all the kids know, God did use Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. There's no end to the ups and downs those covenant people endured, and invited upon themselves, once they got into the desert, once they followed Moses and then Joshua into the Promised Land. The promise of God kept them going; kept them occasionally ascendant as during the reign of King David; kept them sometimes repentant; kept them too often complacent and presumptuous—just like it happens for us.

Centuries of Exile and misfortune and neglect went by and the Israelites—the Jews—had all but given up hope, wondering if there were still Anyone left at the other end of the promise they and their ancestors had been hanging onto by a whisper for all those generations. Until finally there was a baby born in Bethlehem; one foretold by John the Baptist. The man the angel instructed to be called “Immanuel”—“God is with us.” Into the world, into the Galilee and Jerusalem came this long-awaited Son of God, the Savior of the world.

Even to the cross He went, keeping His promise to the Father. His blood was shed; His sacred blood sealed and renewed those ancient covenant promises of God: (“On the night He was betrayed, after He had given thanks...in the same way He took the cup, saying “this cup is the new and everlasting Covenant, [poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin, and sealed] in My blood.” [1 Cor 11:27]

The ancient promises were fulfilled, and some new ones added. “No longer need you keep the specifics of the letter of the Law down to the most picky details because it's obvious you will not and cannot—and the power and love are not in keeping them anyway. So from now on, instead, I, Jesus, offer you a new covenant: to not turn your back on Me or the Father's love for you—to accept My forgiveness, My mercy, My love. This is all you need, and I promise I will never leave you nor forsake you.” “Lo, I will be with you to the end of the age.”

This morning, Covenant Sunday, we in this congregation once again take our stand. We let ourselves and others know which side we're on. We are sinners; we are imperfect, and sometimes I suppose we all tend to get discouraged when we think how little progress we seem to be making on the spiritual path.

All the more reason then to worship God together, to give honor and glory to the One who keeps His covenant promises. All the more reason for you to turn in your covenant of membership this morning and register your commitment not only to trust in God, but to claim your present and your future freedom. As you do so, you are taking an increasingly counter-cultural stand. So many today are choosing to enter into contracts instead of promises, whose subtext reads something like “I will be there for you as long as you continue to please me.” “I will remain married to you as long as it feels to me you are meeting my needs.” “I will continue to be involved and to offer my time, my skills, my energies, my money, and my best attitude to this congregation as long as your politics or theology don't make me uncomfortable.” These attitudes are not promises, but rather conditional “contracts.” In the observation of ethicist Stanley Haurwas, “the power of a promise is the power to stick with what we are stuck with.”

When we make a covenant promise we never know what we'll be “stuck with.” All a husband knows when he marries his wife is that twenty years down the road she'll look different and she'll be different from how she was the day of their wedding. All she

knows about him is that he'll probably still like watching sports on TV and he'll probably still have trouble communicating in the way she would like. When she keeps her covenant promise she is affirming, "I am choosing to continue to love him each day whatever the day shall bring."

In this congregation (or any congregation) we can never be sure what we'll be "stuck with." Last year we had about \$120,000 in bad budget surprises (primarily in structural repairs to the rental next door)—but I don't know of any of you who bolted. (We're still in the process of replenishing those funds.) You don't know what kind of sermons Heather or I might come up with, and we don't know how many of you will be listening or heeding. (We do know what Rodger and our choir will sound like as long as he and they are with us, thanks be to God.) None of us knows how the looming economic turmoil will affect our church family—but we are promising to stand by one another and keep our promises anyway—because we worship the God who promises to be there with us. When we keep our covenant promises we are sharing in the nature of God.

As we first pray over our covenants and then submit them to convey our promise to "be there" for one another and for God in 2009, we're striving to be faithful to our Lord with a procedure which matches our convictions. Other organizations, and other churches, handle membership rolls differently: whomever was baptized in a church, whomever gave a donation in the previous twelve months, whomever may have moved away but still has grandchildren in the area and visits at Christmas has not formally notified the office they've joined another church over in Scottsdale six years ago. At least one faith community in the area needs to see an annual copy of your W-2 to be sure you are tithing your ten percent for you to remain a member in good standing there. Lots of different approaches when it comes to church membership.

We have a "covenant" approach. We understand that when the risen Christ invites us into relationship with Himself, thru His Holy Spirit, He also invites us into relationship with everyone else who has responded to Him. There's no such thing as a single grape growing in thin air, not abiding in or connected to the Vine [no hydroponics back then!]; there's no such thing as a disciple of Jesus existing independent of Him and His Church. Every disciple who says "Yes" to Jesus also says "Yes" to the Church Jesus took such pains to establish and whose Spirit still sustains us two millennia later. Being a member of His universal Church is possible only thru being a member of His local church. We understand our covenant to be our way of saying "Yes" to Jesus and His Church through our promise to this local congregation.

The images the New Testament uses for church membership are of organic relationship. No computer printout spitting lists of names of people once affiliated; no treasurer trying to figure out whether someone is current or lapsed. A shepherd loving each sheep in the flock, all related to one another. A bride adorned for her bridegroom. One Body: a hand, an ear, an eye, a foot—all needing one another to function.

No system works worth a darn apart from the presence of the Holy Spirit and the prayers and obedience of people abiding in Christ. But we are trying as best we know how to recognize our organic unity in the one Vine. No one is pressured to join our church or to kindly find another one. No one is pressured to sign up for this or that function, though you might be asked to pray about serving in one particular way or other. (You may have heard we are in need of a new Financial Secretary, for example.)

As far as I know, there is no ulterior motive here. We believe the best system is to allow each of us to seek and follow the will of God for us for the coming year. God is going to be a lot more effective at knowing what and who we need in which capacity than the Nominating Committee. Jesus loves this church even more than we do. The Holy Spirit is going to be a lot more effective at moving each of us forward into the specific places of service and growth each of us needs than Pastor Heather or I would be haranguing you.

Our system offers each of us the chance to seek the will of God and then to communicate our decisions to the church. We all have different gifts; we come to Jesus from different backgrounds and with different baggage—He knows all this. We want to treat each one with the respect God affords each of us. Jesus doesn't require we must tithe before we're holy enough to be part of His Church, or that we must offer to teach Sunday School or go to Open Arms Daycare Center three weekends per year—Jesus asks, and waits, for us freely and gratefully to offer to Him out of all we have received. If anyone knows who we are, all of us but sinners trying to allow His Spirit and each other to polish some of the kinks out, it's Jesus. No use playing "pretend."

There is surely a church out there discouraged and frustrated and contentious—but it is surely not this church. You understand God makes and keeps His covenant promises, and as you decide to step up and "go public," to encourage one another and give glory to God, you share in His divine nature. God bless you. Amen

### **Exodus 2:24-3:15**

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

