

## The Story of God and Us: Covenant

**Westheimer Sermon:** <https://vimeo.com/431222773>

**Gethsemane Sermon:** <https://vimeo.com/431219810>

**Pastors' Discussion:** <https://vimeo.com/430506696>

**Sermon Workbook:** <https://www.stlukesmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GodandUs-workbook-web.pdf>

The story of scripture is the story of redemption through relationship, and covenants are the central theme that form the backbone for the relationship between God and humans. This movement of God towards humans is emphasized in the United Methodist communion liturgy:

You formed us in your image  
and breathed into us the breath of life.  
When we turned away, and our love failed,  
your love remained steadfast.  
You delivered us from captivity,  
**made covenant to be our sovereign God,**  
and spoke to us through the prophets.

Let's start by talking about what covenants are and are not. Covenants are not the same as contracts. A contract is built on an if/then proposition. There are conditions to contracts: "You do your part and if you do your part, then I have to do my part. Likewise, if I do my part, then you have to do your part."

A covenant is an unbreakable agreement regardless of the "if" that is so important in a contract. In other words, the agreeing parties in a covenant are essentially saying, "I'm going to do my part even if you don't hold up your end. I'm still bound by my end of the covenant."

As Dr. Pace mentioned in the sermon, there are five major covenants that God makes with humans throughout scripture:

Covenant	Scripture	Promise	Sign	Who is included:
<b>Noah</b>	Genesis 8:20-9:17	God will not destroy the earth by flood	Rainbow	Noah and his nuclear family
<b>Abraham</b>	Genesis 12, 15, 17	Many descendants, Promised Land, Abraham's family is blessed to be a blessing	Circumcision	Abraham and his extended family

<b>Covenant</b>	<b>Scripture</b>	<b>Promise</b>	<b>Sign</b>	<b>Who is included:</b>
<b>Moses</b>	Exodus 19-24	Israel will be a holy people, they will be brought into the Promised Land, and God will dwell with them	The Law	People
<b>King David</b>	2 Samuel 7	The messiah will come from David's lineage (his throne will last forever)	(none)	Nation
<b>New Covenant</b>	Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:19-22	God's law is written on our hearts, we are all forgiven, and we are a part of the family of God forever	Jesus	World

In the ancient world, the most common kind of agreement was a vassal treaty. This is an agreement between two parties in which one party is more powerful than the other – one is usually a monarch and the other is subordinate (the vassal). The monarch decrees what it is that the vassal has to do with the following pronouncements:

- Preamble – declaration of right over vassal
- History – review of what the monarch has done for the vassal
- Stipulations – overview of what the vassal will now do for the monarch
- Orders for the ratification and deposition of the document in an official place of worship along with regular readings
- List of Witnesses
- Blessings and Curses – a declaration of what happens if the vassal obeys or does not obey the demands

If you read through that list carefully, you will find similarities in structure to the declarations of covenants by God with Noah, Abraham, Moses and King David. That is because God uses this same agreement structure when God makes covenants with God's people. But there is a further distinction that God makes – that is to mimic a land grant treaty.

Land grant treaties were special forms of vassal treaties for vassals who had served the king in an exceptional way. In these agreements, a piece of land was given to the vassal and there is no dissolution of the agreement if the vassal does not live up to their end of the agreement. The land grant treaties are thought of as being eternal – they cannot be taken away nor overturned.

These characteristics of the land grant treaty are hallmarks of God's eternal covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and King David. They are eternal and will be upheld by God no matter what the people do.

Because these covenants are intended to last for generations after they are established, the covenants are binding on the descendants and are renewed with the descendants. But the descendants are sometimes far enough removed from the original covenant that they do not take it as seriously. One example of that is with Jacob, Abraham's grandson.

We first see Jacob make a covenant with God (Genesis 28:20-22) after Jacob ran away from home. He was sleeping in the wilderness and dreamed of a ladder that reached up to heaven. But he goes on to manipulate Laban's flocks and allow idol worship in his family. Why didn't that covenant work?

That's because it wasn't really a renewal of the Abrahamic covenant. Jacob worked in a backdoor so that he could break the covenant. He says to God, "if you take care of me I will give you 10% of my possessions and income." It wasn't about pledging loyalty to God no matter what, it was about pledging loyalty to God **IF** God would be with him and provide for him all of his needs.

Did God do that? Yes. But Jacob forgot about God's provision and so he forgot about the "covenant." This is relatable for modern Biblical readers because everyone can recall a time when they made a vow when things weren't going well and then forgotten about it when things start to go their way again. It's easy to forget how hopeless you were when you have a reason to hope again. For Jacob, his first "covenant" with God came when he was running from his brother, had no protection, and was worried about where he would land. But over the course of time, he marries two women, has many children, amasses a large herd of animals, and is a successful shepherd. He forgot the goodness of God because he was taking his blessings for granted.

By the time Jacob gets to Bethel, he knows God has been with him, God has fulfilled God's promise, and Jacob is ready to put away idols. He remembers that God upheld God's end of the bargain. He is ready to be in a relationship with God that isn't dependent on what happens in his life. Right after Jacob renews the Abrahamic covenant, his wife Rachel dies. *Being in covenant with God doesn't mean that all shall be well always, but that God is with us always.*

Psalms 136 says, "God's steadfast love endures forever." Love is the defining characteristic of the covenants – God does not create these covenants in order to control people or force them into relationship for no reason. God's love for the world is so powerful that God wants to be in relationship with us and these covenants guide – and enhance – that relationship.

Tim Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer Church in NYC, wrote:

A covenant relationship is not just intimate despite being legal. It is a relationship that is more intimate *because* it is legal. Why would that be so? We can begin by observing that making a binding, public marriage vow to another person is an enormous act of love in and of itself. Someone who says, "I love you, but we don't need to be married," may be saying, "I don't love you enough to curtail my freedom for you." The willingness to enter a binding covenant, far from stifling love, is a way of enhancing it, even supercharging it.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What stories have been significant in shaping your family origins? How do you think covenants help shape family narratives?
2. What is God's desired relationship with humans? Be as specific as possible in your answer.
3. What is the difference between a covenant and a contract? What is the difference between a Biblical covenant and a secular covenant?
4. When have you looked back and seen that God was present in your life, upholding the covenant, even when you ignored God or broke the covenant?
5. Is it easier for you to see God's faithful presence when you look back at your life rather than in the current moment? If so, what are some things you can do to remind yourself of God's faithfulness at all times?
6. What are the ways that the covenants are expanded from Noah to the New Covenant? What is the effect of this expansion?