

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on March 1, 2015)

Your Name, Our Covenant

Text: **Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16** (*NIV Reader's Version*)

When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him. He said, "I am the Mighty God. Walk faithfully with me. Live in a way that pleases me. I will now act on my covenant between me and you. I will greatly increase the number of your children after you."

Abram fell with his face to the ground. God said to him, "This is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations. You will not be called Abram anymore. Your name will be Abraham, because I have made you a father of many nations. I will greatly increase the number of your children after you. Nations and kings will come from you. I will make my covenant with you last forever. It will be between me and you and your family after you for all time to come. I will be your God. And I will be the God of all your family after you.

Text: **Psalms 22:23-31** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

"You who worship Yahweh, give praise! Daughters of Leah, daughters of Rachel, glorify Yahweh! Sons of Jacob, fall down and worship! For God has not despised—not disdained—the suffering of those in pain! God didn't hide, but answered them when they cried for help!"

You are the theme of my praise in the Great Assembly, and I will fulfill my vows in the presence of your worshipers. Those who are poor will eat and be satisfied, those who seek you will give you praise—long life to their hearts!

The whole earth, from one end to the other, will remember and come back to you; all the families of the nations will bow down to you. For yours is the kingdom, you Ruler of nations! Those who had feasted and devoured the poor—now they'll bow down; the most affluent in the land will kneel before you. They all go down to the dust and none can keep themselves alive. But my children will be faithful to you and they will be told about Yahweh for generations to come. They will come and proclaim your justice to a people yet unborn: "All this Yahweh has done!"

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Your Name, Our Covenant"**

I've been thinking a lot about the word, "covenant" these days. In our reading from Genesis today, we encounter the Lord appearing to Abram and saying, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." And then throughout the next few verses making sure Abram gets it: "And I will make my COVENANT between me and you...This is my COVENANT with you...I will establish my COVENANT between me and you...for an everlasting COVENANT."

Seems God is pretty emphatic and, one might even say, enthused about this word Covenant as it is used so often in putting forth what will be done between God's self and Abram and Sarai.

But what does the word covenant really mean?

In his extensive essay on this very word, commentator and theologian, Dr. Gerard Van Groningen tells us that, "the term "covenant" is of Latin origin (con venire), meaning a coming together, [and] presupposes two or more parties who come together to make a contract, agreeing on promises, stipulations, privileges, and responsibilities. In religious and theological circles," however, he notes, "there has not been agreement on precisely what is to be understood by the biblical term

[as] it is used variously in biblical contexts. In political situations, it can be translated [as a] treaty; in a social setting, it means a lifelong friendship agreement; or it can refer to a marriage.

“The biblical words most often translated “covenant,” he writes are, “berit [tyir.B] in the Old Testament (appearing about 280 times) and diatheke [diaghvkh] in the New Testament ([where it appears] at least 33 times).”

And, as is true with most anything having to do with the Bible, the word origin and meaning itself has been hotly debated over the centuries and probably will continue to be debated long after you and I pass from this planet.

In his essay, Dr. Van Groningen tell us, “the preferred meaning of this Old Testament word is bond; a covenant [referring] “to two or more parties bound together.”

And what more do we want from God than that? To be bound to God it seems would be our ultimate goal as sentient and spiritual creatures looking to our creator within whom we live and move and have our being.

But not so fast... remember that to accept this meaning of the word covenant we must also accept the concept of there being two or more parties that are bound together. This isn't a one-way street kind of concept. This isn't God saying I'll be bound to you, but you just go ahead and do your own thing, cause you don't really have any skin in the game.

No, a covenant as I see it being expressed throughout the Hebrew and Greek testaments and as I have lived and seen it expressed in my own life as well as in the life of a church means we have as much responsibility to God as God has responsibility to us. The idea of being co-creators with God that Jesus alludes to so often in the Greek testament is an enlargement on this idea of covenant and one that is worth paying attention to, especially during this time of reflection and introspection we call Lent.

Many of the covenants referred to in Genesis, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and First and Second Samuel, “were between two equal parties,” Dr. Van Groningen writes. “This means that the covenant relationship was bilateral. The bond was sealed by both parties vowing, often by oath, that each, having equal privileges and responsibilities, would carry out their assigned roles.”

But it is here that Dr. Van Groningen and I part ways. For he believes that God's covenants were not bilateral but unilateral as “God initiated, determined the elements, and confirmed his covenant with humanity” and that we humans were simply recipients of the covenant and not expected to, “offer elements to the bond.”

I think this idea of our relationship to God is at the heart of so much of what many would deem “wrong” with religion; this idea that God is some type of despot. That God says, “here's what I'm going to do and you have no choice in the matter, no give and take.” This idea of God as a dictator and God's kin-dom as totalitarian flies in the face of everything God is about in terms of free will and the choice we are given to be in covenant or to not be in covenant. This is NOT a puppet on a string kind of thing.

According to our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum for this week, the covenant we are looking at today shows, “a powerful intimacy in the image of God and Abram walking together, talking, making promises to each other, binding themselves together as if they were comrades, friends, partners.”

“At its best, covenant is egalitarian, not patriarchal;” Dr. Bruce Epperly wrote in his essay on this passage this week. “It is expansive not parochial. Sarah is the mother of nations; fallible like her husband, but open to God's promises and creativity moving through her life. There is great fecundity in this scripture and the promise that God makes a way where we see no way forward.”

And there's the gist of living into this kind of covenant with our Creator. Trusting in God we build God's trust in us. Relying on God's promises, we uphold our covenant by being faithful and living into those promises no matter what the road is like as we journey together.

"For God has not despised—not disdained—the suffering of those in pain! God didn't hide, but answered them when they cried for help!" our Psalmist sung out today. "YOU are the theme of my praise in the Great Assembly, and I will fulfill my vows in the presence of your worshipers. Those who are poor will eat and be satisfied, those who seek you will give you praise—long life to their hearts!"

Fulfilling our vows to God opens the floodgates of God's bountiful heart, always present for us, and allows God to fulfill God's covenant to even the poorest among us that they will eat and be satisfied. When we live in Covenant with God we're not the only beneficiaries of God's grace. We realize that God's grace is for all and find new ways and new opportunities to bring that good news to others.

"Covenant is about birth and growth. We might also ponder places where we depend on God's promises and, in so doing, open to amazing releases of divine power," Dr. Epperly writes.

For the first fifteen or so years of my life, I was known as "Donnie." Not a tremendously difficult thing to imagine probably, is it? Picking up one of my old "I Can Read" books to share with the preschoolers last week during our every Friday story-time, I opened the cover to find my un-capitalized name scrawled across the inside cover: d-o-n-n-i-e. Looking through my school papers in the subsequent years you'll find my name capitalized and, as what I can only imagine is a symbol of what is to come, an added explanation point at the end, "Donnie!" as if I'm emerging from behind a curtain every time I spell my name. Ta-dah!

In high school I moved on to Don, which stuck with me for a number of decades and which many people still use to identify me now. And, although I prefer Donald, I don't feel anything is gained by forcing people to call you by a different name than the one that's comfortable for them.

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet." William Shakespeare has Juliet saying to Romeo. Ah, if only the Montague's and Capulet's felt the same way, their tale may have turned out differently (but certainly not as interestingly).

It wasn't until I was attending a Film Acting Workshop for a summer in Maine around the turn of the century that I realized I wanted to claim my given name, "Donald." I wasn't sure why at the time, except that I was being given permission in that setting to be and live fully into who I was and to live into a new kind of identity I was establishing for myself that had been 40 years in the making. And when I came home, everything changed.

I realize it's complete hubris to draw a parallel between my own experience and that of our faithful parents of billions, Abraham and Sarah, but I can't help but think that God's renaming of them in the moment God's covenant is established with them is highly symbolic of the transformation that happens in the whole of our lives when we enter into covenant with our Maker. Embracing the promises, making our vows, surrendering our egos to the work of the Divine Spirit, we truly aren't who we were before. We need a new name. We need to be identified as choosing to be one with God and, paradoxically, in relationship with God at the same time.

Let's take a little time now, to continue to build on that relationship, shall we?

Last Sunday we continued to walk our Lenten road together as we embarked on what our Seasons of the Spirit has deemed a "Soul Journey." Each Sunday we are journeying together to a different destination to see what there is to receive there and to ask ourselves some of the same questions each time, along with one or two new ones that relate to the day's theme.

So, please take another little piece of paper and a pen from the pew in front of you, or use your bulletin or your own pen or whatever you want, and let's take a little time to consider some questions for today as we journey to our second destination we're calling, "The Sun's Farewell"

Close your eyes for a moment and journey within to any place where you are watching the sun sink into Earth's horizon. It might be over an ocean, or a hill, maybe it's in the desert or where mountains touch sky. Whatever image comes up for you, go with it.

Breathe deeply as you encounter this sun's farewell experience and let its essence wash over you. What does it feel like here? What sounds do you hear? Is there a scent in the air? Does the rhythm of your heartbeat and your breathing change as you gaze at the sun going down?

(silence)

In this sacred soul space, I invite you to ponder a few questions and then write down whatever comes to you. Don't worry if nothing comes to you in this moment, but take these questions with you if you like and see if anything comes to you throughout the week.

First, What might God have to say about this place?

Second, How might this places, this experience, this realization of God relate to other areas of my life: my work, my family, myself?

And finally, What is it like to be in relationship with a God who walks with us, who knows our history, who knows our true nature, who knows us by name?

(A Call to Worship from liturgyoutside.net)

My name is a gift from my past
my name connects me to my father and his father before him.

My name is my mother's sisters.

My name was given to me in marriage.

My name was chosen for me.

My name describes me.

My name is familiar.

My name is comfortable.

except when my name no longer fits.

when my name is a stranger,
when my name pulls me to a place I must leave.

And then one day, God changed my name.

My name is 'faithful'.

My name is 'child of God'.

My name is 'beloved'.

Amen.