



Covenant is a theme that runs throughout our readings, our liturgy and our celebrations today. In a legal context, covenant means a contract – which, again from a legal perspective, requires two or more parties who bargain and exchange consideration, or something of value for the promises made. In order for a legal contract to be binding, the parties have to be of **generally** equal status and ability to negotiate the terms.

Covenant in a Biblical or theological sense carries this meaning and much more. We humans clearly do not stand on equal ground with the Holy One. And yet the Blessed One reaches out to us and makes promises to us about our value to God. And God asks that we respond by loving God with all our heart, our mind and our soul and that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

A covenant is thus a bond that exists between people, showing respect and care for the other. One of the earliest Biblical covenants is between God and Noah. In Genesis 6:18 through Genesis 9:17 we read: “But I will establish my covenant with you...” and then Noah is instructed to bring two of every kind into the ark so that creation may continue after the flood. And after the flood recedes God reminds Noah that God has created a covenant that God will never again flood the entire earth. The symbol of that covenant is the rainbow.

Not all covenants have such a symbol, but one of the symbols we do have is children. God’s covenant with Abraham promised that the descendants of Abraham will be more than the stars or the grains of sand (Genesis 15, et seq). And we are reminded of the importance of children in the Psalm this morning when we read: “Children are a heritage from the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is a gift” (Ps. 127:4).

Rabbi Amy Scheinerman writes:

We live our lives as a tapestry of relationships: with parents, siblings, partners and other relatives; with friends, neighbors, and colleagues; with the larger world and the environment; and with God. Our relationships are a lens through which we see ourselves because we gain self-understanding when we consider how others see us and feel about us. In addition, our relationships are a vehicle for our interaction with the world. [Christian and] Jewish tradition teaches us to take each relationship seriously by nurturing and attending to it so it can be as healthy and constructive as possible.¹

¹ <https://reformjudaism.org/practice/ask-rabbi/what-does-jews%E2%80%99-covenant-god-mean> (Nov. 7, 2018)

We celebrate this morning Estelle Cohn Rossman, born to Emma and Zach Reidy. The gift of life and the promise made by God to us that life is precious and to be celebrated. In both the Jewish and the Christian faith traditions, we celebrate new life. We celebrate a bit differently but what is important is that we recognize a child as a gift from God, as a confirmation that our covenant with God continues in this new person. In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, we ask, as part of our liturgy, for the parents to name the child – to acknowledge the individuality and often, through a name, the continuity, of the child to the family and thus to God. We pray, we ask for blessings and yes, we will have food later on!

For Episcopalians, baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into God's church. The bond established by baptism is indissoluble. No matter what we do, we cannot run so far from God that God cannot see or find us or call us back. The covenant established with Abraham and handed down through both our faith traditions exists, will we or won't we. We are the beloved of God. Turning to God through the sacrament of Baptism is "an activity of heart, soul and mind. It is changing sides in the cosmic struggle" [of good and evil to commit yourself to be in covenant with God and to live a life of love and compassion for all creation].² Baptism is a community or congregational liturgy. It is a celebration that we do together, not separately or privately. Throughout our service you are asked to respond verbally, adding your promises to those of the parents and sponsors. You speak as a reminder of what was promised at your Baptism. You are an integral part of this covenant of baptism. You now have a responsibility to Estelle that will last your whole life to be a model of grace and love to her and to others so that God's light may shine through you. Baptism is an event on a particular day and time. And yet, it is also a process. Estelle begins today what we hope will be a lifelong relationship with God. This is not a one-and-done event but we pray is rather the start of a journey that will continue until her last breath.

For us, Baptism is a sacrament meaning that it is something established by Jesus during his ministry on earth to evidence our relationship with and our commitment to God. Baptism is an "outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace" (BCP, 857).

We use water during this sacrament, remembering John the Baptist and Jesus at the River Jordan. In Mark 1: 9-11 we read:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Water is thus a symbol of new life and new relationship. Water is time and again a critical symbol in our faith. From the beginning when "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2) to the baby Moses floating on the river where he is found by Pharaoh's daughter, to the parting of the sea enabling the Exodus and so many more times water is part of what enables us to come before God. Our Prayer of Thanksgiving Over the Water (BCP 306) will remind us of the centrality of water as a symbol of our covenant with God.

² Leonell L. Mitchell. *Praying Shapes Believing* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1985) 98-99.

Ruth 3: 1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12: 38-44

We will also offer to Emma and Zach a lit candle as a symbol of the light of God which is always around us. The candle serves to illuminate what we do in Baptism. It is also a reminder that the light of God overcomes the darkness of the world. And a reminder that the light of God's love for us can never be extinguished.

Similarly, the words we will use later reinforce the welcome that God gave to Jesus: "with you I am well pleased." God is present with all of us today. God welcomes Estelle Cohn Rossman to this world and to the covenantal relationship – and we can do no less. **Amen.**