

“What Does Being a Covenant People Really Mean?”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
February 22, 2015

Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-13

There are some words within our faith tradition that we would never ask “what does this term mean?” or at least we assume that we understand what the definition is, even if we may not always be clear and certain how to follow through.

Surely one of those biblical words is “love,” and another would be “faith” itself, and still another “community.” Do we live these terms to the fullest? Probably not. Do we understand all that the Bible means when it uses such terms? That is debatable, but at least we assume we know what they mean, and would be seen as being simplistic in our approach if we asked someone what they meant by such terms.

Then there are other terms that we may not know fully what the term means, but we might be embarrassed to ask about, and so we pretend we know. In that category I would put the word “discipleship,” and maybe even “commitment,” and certainly “revelation.” We all have an idea what these terms mean, but how we would illustrate such terms may be more difficult.

Then there are terms that we simply do not understand, not sure why they are there, and have no qualms about asking what they mean. In fact, we may even think there is not a reason to ask what they mean, because they seem so out of touch with our ordinary life, why would we bother to find out what they mean? “Eschatology” is at the top of the list for me, and possibly “apocalyptic.” (If you want to know the meaning of such terms, I am sure that Catherine would be delighted to define them for you after the service.)

For me, the term “covenant” falls somewhere between category 2 and 3 – a term we think we know, but are too embarrassed to ask for the definition, or possibly a term we hear often enough, yet we may wonder “What does it mean?” in the first place.

In Genesis we have one of many references to Covenant between God and the people. In this covenant, it is one sided – God makes a covenant with the people, and it sounds like it is all up to God. No reciprocity, no response needed. God promises that no more will God flood the world and kill people – life is too precious for that to happen.

Other covenants, such as the covenants later in Genesis, in Deuteronomy and the prophets, are much more mutual – the covenant that “I will be your God and you will be my people,” for example, implies that each one of us has a role.

But in the Genesis passage read this morning, it sounds like a covenant that is only up to God.

This is a mistake if we hear these words in this way.
For a covenant always implies a mutual response and responsibility.

Families know all about this. A child may say “I did not have a choice in terms of being born into this family,” yet a family only works if parents carry out their nurturing responsibilities, and children allow themselves to be guided and nurtured by their parents. We each have a role, and a response.

Covenant is like that.

Throughout Lent we will be focussing on the Grandfather teachings of the aboriginal tradition – one teaching each week. Today it is the teaching around “wisdom.”

Our relationship with aboriginal people is an excellent example of the meaning of covenant, and how we can destroy that meaning in our ordinary lives.

If we have a covenant with God that is mutual, that demands something from us, then we need to realize that the same is true of treaties that have been signed years ago with aboriginal people.

I always understand (from the history classes I experienced within the Ontario public school system) that our first nations people are treaty people – they (for the most part) entered into treaties with government officials of Canada or the British Commonwealth before that, and so they are under the power of those treaties.

But that is wrongheaded.

We are *all treaty people*, for the very nature of a treaty is that both signing authorities have a responsibility to live into the terms of the treaty.

You and I, as the people on whose behalf governments signed these treaties, are part of the treaty, and we have as much responsibility to make sure the terms of the treaties are lived out as the aboriginal people themselves.

That helps us to understand what it means to live in a covenant.

It is not up to God. When global warming threatens coastal towns and cities on the ocean coasts of the world, we are in danger of denying the covenant of God that no longer will I bring a flood to destroy life. Our lifestyle and abuse of the environment may be a barrier to living that covenant.

You see, being a covenant people is about being sensitive to the needs of others, and responsible for the agreements that we have made.

It is the biblical idea of love and community and discipleship and commitment and faith and understanding and, yes, even eschatology and revelation all wrapped up into one word, for covenant means we seek to do what is life giving, what we are called to do, and also is hope preserving, what we are expected to be in the future.

God calls us into covenant, and so we seek to be a people who understand and follow expectations that may be beyond what we ourselves would determine to be our lot in life. May we be thankful for those expectations, and may we seek to live in partnership with the God of wisdom and blessings as we continue our faith journey in this season of Lent.