

biblestudy: october 2020

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

October 4, 2020 Text: Exodus 24:1-12 "The Covenant at Sinai"

Unless you are a detailed reader of the Old Testament, there is a good chance that you are not familiar with Nadab and Abihu (Exodus 24:1). These sons of Aaron have interesting side stories (they don't come to a good end—Leviticus 10:1-7), but for right now in this account of Moses and covenant, they have a special role, joining the leader to the top of the mountain to see God (Exodus 24:9-10).

What struck me about this was that in this telling of how God gave God's word to God's people there are some people who are there to help but who are not the heroes. How about these two? How about the unnamed seventy elders of Israel who joined them? Servants of God are sometimes called upon to take secondary, what-can-I-do-to-help roles.

There is a temptation to think that I am not as important to God as the leaders whose names show up in all of the stories from the United Methodist News Service. Is Moses the only valuable person in this incident? Let me answer it this way: the renowned quarterback won't get much done if the nameless offensive line does not do its job. Sometimes, in the life of the faith community, we may be needed as quarterback, but more frequently we are needed as part of the offensive line. (If this image does not make sense, check with someone on your local high school football team.)

The covenant between God and Israel was sealed with the gift of blood (Exodus 24:8). Does this sound familiar (Romans 5:9)?

The people say clearly that they will obey (Exodus 24:7). The word translated "obey" or "obedience" is *shâma*. It includes two meanings: (a) I have heard what you said and (b) I will do it. Vague promises to follow God's will are meaningless unless we have a grasp on what that will of God is. God has been rather specific in what we call the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). Personally, I'd prefer God to be a bit more vague. In this text, the Israelites say that (a) they know what God wants them to do and (b) they will do it.

So, most of us are Nadab and Abihu, lesser-known figures in the story. That's okay. They do what God needs them to do. And then, we struggle to be people who hear what God wants and then promise to it.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Christian Word Book (Graded Press) says this about covenant: "...the assuming of mutual responsibility was the essence of this covenant."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "I hear You, Lord, so..."

October 11, 2020 Text: Joshua 24:14-28 "The Covenant in Joshua's Time"

As I sat at my desk, ready to start working on this week's commentary, I decided to take a break and to watch the evening news on one of the major networks. There were several updates reported. The four major topics were: (1) coronavirus spreading from China, (2) the impeachment trial of President Trump, (3) final preparation for the Democratic caucuses in Iowa, and (4) countdown to the Super Bowl. That was on January 31, 2020. How many of these matters are still part of your "major news of the day" now in October?

In this week's study text, Joshua wants the people to know for sure that their decisions are not just for January; they are also for October...and November...and December. He says, "Make your decision carefully because you are going to have to live with it" (Joshua 24:15). The prophet challenges the people to recognize that just because serving the Lord seems like a good idea now (in January), be prepared to know that if you fail to serve God faithfully, come October God will punish your change of heart (Joshua 24:19).

Joshua teaches that loyalty to God is not an "on again/off again" decision. He puts up a stone marker that will be an ongoing reminder of the promise the people have made (Joshua 24:27). What reminds you of the promises you have made to God?

Notice how this study text ends (Joshua 24:28). The people leave this highly dramatic moment of challenge and commitment and return to

life as usual. "Then Joshua sent the people away to each one's legacy." As is often noted, all of life is not lived on the mountain top; some of it is in the valley...and might we add, some of it is in the desert. After Joshua leads the people through this exploration of what covenant life will mean, he sends them away to live that life in their ongoing, ordinary places. Let's put it this way: I am called to be as faithful on Thursday at the Harris Teeter as I am on a heart trip to the Vatican or to Wesley Chapel in London.

Yes, God's covenant is for the long haul. It is for high moments and it is for daily life. In the words of our United Methodist membership vows, it is wherever and whenever we participate with our "prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness."

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Handbook of Christian Theology* (eds., Musser & Price, Abingdon), Thomas Parker has written: "The term 'covenant' enters Christian theology from the biblical world, where it is said that God relates to all creatures, especially to Israel and the church, by a free decision and the gift of life together."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "You have called, gift-giving God, and now I answer..."

October 18, 2020 Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12 "Ezra Reads the Instruction to the People"

What jumps out at me in this text is the spirit of joy and celebration. When the people wept (Nehemiah 8:9) (no doubt because they remembered the brokenness that led to the Babylonian exile), the leaders said, "Go, eat chocolate cheesecake! Have seconds on dessert! Drink all the Dr. Pepper you want! And take some banana pudding to any neighbor who does not have any!" (Nehemiah 8:10---uh, my rough paraphrase)

Hearing "God's instruction" (Nehemiah 8:7-8) might make us feel guilty for all the ways we have failed to obey. But there is something to be celebrated: God has kept God's end of the bargain. This incident unfolded during the Festival of the Booths (Nehemiah 8:14). This festival was party time, remembering how God had given the Hebrew children booths in which to live when they were in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:43). This was a great agricultural feast (Leviticus 23:40, Deuteronomy 16:13).

In the patriarchal context in which the Hebrews lived, it is significant that the prophet makes a point of saying that both men and women were

attentive (Nehemiah 8:2-3). There are no gender limitations on the gifts of God. "The book of law" (New Revised Standard Version). "the law of Moses" (Contemporary English Version), "the law of God" (The Living Bible), "the Torah" (footnote in Common English Bible), "the Instruction" (Common English Bible)---however we call it, God has told God's people how to live. And God's people need to hear over and over again what God expects of God's children.

Note that it is the people themselves who ask Ezra to get the Instruction, the book of law, and read it to them again (Nehemiah 8:1). They want the whole instruction from God. Maybe it is not too much of a stretch to say that when a local church follows the lectionary, the worship leaders are saying that we need to hear the full word of God, and not just those passages that are favorites (or give us a hiding place from God's expectation).

Moses. Joshua. Ezra. The story continues.

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What Someone Else Has Said:

David Brooks (*The Second Mountain*, Random House) quotes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: “A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to

form an ‘us.’ That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Speak again, Lord God, as You did to Moses and to Joshua and to Ezra, so they could speak to us...”

October 25, 2020 Text: Luke 22:14-20 “The Covenant through Jesus”

Sneak a look at the verses that follow today’s study text. In Luke 22:21-23, Jesus says someone is going to betray Him. In Luke 22:24, the disciples start arguing about which one was the greatest. In Luke 22:34, Jesus predicts that Peter will betray Him. In Luke 22:45, He found the disciples sleeping, overcome with grief. In Luke 22:47-48, Judas betrays Jesus. In Luke 22:50, one of the disciples turns to violence. In Luke 22:54-61, Peter denies Jesus three times.

Reading all these, I am left to wonder: How did we ever come to think that being in covenant with Jesus was going to be a smooth, easy, uncomplicated thing?

In today’s study text, Jesus remembers the ways in which blood (a signal of life) is used by Moses to mark God’s covenant (Exodus 24:8) and points again to what the prophet Zechariah said about the blood that marks Israel’s covenant with God (Zechariah 9:11). The new covenant is to be signed with the blood of Jesus Himself (Luke 22:20). He is really present when we come to the Table to partake of His body and blood. When we come to the Communion Table, we are in fellowship not only with those who gather there with us; we are also holding hands with Moses and Joshua and Ezra and with our Lord Himself.

The apostle Paul got upset because some in the Corinthian church abused the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). In Corinth, Holy

Communion was part of a larger banquet and some of the wealthier folks were stuffing themselves before the poorer members even got to the gathering. Paul even saw the Lord’s Table as a social justice issue! The covenant we have in Christ Jesus speaks to how we get along with one another. As the old saying reminds us, “The ground at the foot of the cross is level.”

Jesus takes the unleavened bread of Passover (Luke 22:19); it points back to how the Israelites had to rush away from Egypt, not even having time for their bread to rise (Exodus 12:39). In this way, our Lord links God’s saving covenant to the continuing story of God’s prevenient grace seeking and saving and sending a people. May it be so.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In a World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper (*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Geneva), the study concludes: “The Church receives the Eucharist as a gift from the Lord...(It) is a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God...(God’s very self) acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Lord Jesus, meet us again as we gather in Your name...”

Don’t judge each day by the harvest that you
reap but by the seeds that you plant.
Robert Louis Stevenson

Bible References from the Seventh Month - October (Ethanim)

Feasts

Leviticus 23:27 “On exactly the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you, and you shall humble your souls and present an offering by fire to the Lord.

1 Kings 8:2 “All the men of Israel assembled themselves to King Solomon at the feast, in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month”.

Leviticus 23:24 “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘In the seventh month on the first of the month you shall have a rest, a reminder by blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation.

Nehemiah 8:13-15 ”Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law. They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."

Altar rebuilt and offerings renewed

Ezra 3:1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

Ezra 3:6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, but the foundation of the temple of the Lord had not been laid.

Jubilee proclaimed

Leviticus 25:9 “You shall then sound a ram’s horn abroad on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall sound a horn all through your land”.