Covenant: Never Easy, Always Worth It
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
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Reflection
“A central theme of the Bible is covenant, the notion of making commitments and keeping them, of making promises and fulfilling them. God’s self-revelation showed a covenant-keeping God. That is who God is. That is how the Divine Self meets Israel and relates to the church. That is how God defines our world for us as a process of covenant-making and covenant-keeping. And that is the good news of the Gospel: that God is faithful to the covenant.” - Walter Brueggemann

Introduction
Listen now, for the story of Abram and Sarai receiving their new names. Listen now, for a piece of the Genesis story. To set it in context: in the first 10 chapters of Genesis we hear a cosmic history, and we hear promises made to all of creation. In the eleventh chapter, we move from the cosmic to the individual, from all of creation to one - seemingly random - man and woman and their children. Yet God’s call to Abram, and God’s covenant, are, we are told, will make them a blessing to all nations, and in them, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The story lasts many chapters but our focus today is the covenant giving portion of Chapter 17. So listen, for the word of blessing God has for us, in this scripture passage today

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 I 2 will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Prayer

Sermon
The covenant that God made with Abraham was a bit more weighty than your average promise. This was a covenant that spanned generations, that extended across nations, a covenant.
But there was no new members’ class before this covenant was made.
Abraham and Sarah did not sit down for pre-covenantal counseling in the pastor’s office.
They did not memorize in advance the responses they would offer when they would kneel with a hand placed on their shoulder.
They did not sign and date a membership certificate, nor set up stones to in a pillar to symbolize their part.
No – this was an overarching covenant, initiated by God and fulfilled by God, and done in God’s way.
And this was a mutual covenant, God had a part to play but so did Abraham and Sarah.
I boggle at this a bit. If I were picking people with whom to make such a covenant, I am not entirely sure I would have chosen Abram and Sarai. Abraham twice has Sarah pretend to be his sister in order to pull a fast one on a foreign ruler. Sarah co-opts a family slave into bearing Abraham’s child and then casts her and the child out. And neither one of them believes God when God first says: you will have descendents more numerous than the stars or the sand. To put it mildly, Abraham is flawed and Sarah is doubtful. And they are the people God chooses to represent and embody this word, covenant, which is to them and to all people.
God chose Abraham and Sarah, flawed people, with whom to begin a covenant. That says something about God. It says, God can use anyone for good. Sometimes you’ll hear folks talk about the strong faith of Abraham, and he was faithful: but also flawed, and God chose him, anyway.
That is good news for me, at least, as another flawed human being – and maybe good news for you, too? God calls and chooses and covenants with people not based on their worthiness, but based on God’s love.
In this story, then, “is set the pattern of mutual faithfulness that God intends in all future relationship with humankind.”
God iterates and reiterates covenant with people over and over and over again – that says something about God, too. God is faithful, steadfast, loving.
“All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God’s covenant and God’s decrees.” – Psalm 25:10.
It is not the first time God has spoken covenant to human beings and to creation, and it is not the last: Noah heard the rainbow covenant and Jeremiah spoke of God’s covenant to be written on people’s hearts. And after the covenant was written in the sky, and the covenant was shaped by their children, and the covenant was symbolized in the land of Canaan, and the covenant was made with kings, and the covenant was written on their hearts, Jesus said: here is a new way for you to experience the love of God. Here is my body, broken. Do you see God’s covenant in it?
This is good news for us, too, for from the first decades of God’s first covenant words, human beings have have had trouble living up to God’s invitation. But we get closer than we would on our own, for the same reason Abraham was able to be faithful: because God goes with us on the journey. God will not walk away from Her children. God will keep on offering us covenant promises.
Now, it might seem that God does not speak covenants so clearly anymore. Maybe we’re not as tuned to hear it; or perhaps it is our turn, to live into and speak our side of our covenant.
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It was 1995 and we called ourselves The Committee Of Ten. There were ten of us, and we met Often. The UCC church I had joined was in the midst of a Situation (did you hear the capital S?) and wanted a Committee that would represent the full spectrum of the congregation. I was the only college student in history to say yes to serving on a church committee that met every Saturday at 8 am. We prayed. We surveyed. We prayed. We researched. We sought counsel. We prayed. Finally, we recommended. The congregation discerned, prayed, and yes voted. And came through, stronger. It was never easy – but we felt God’s presence and guidance in the middle of our early Saturday sessions.
What held us together, as a community, was covenant. And God, sitting in the center of that covenant, strengthened us. It was a congregation of imperfect people, bound together with love and history and covenant. It was in that Committee Of Ten that I found, in my heart of hearts, I am UCC.
Today I am wearing a UCC stole, given to me by Rev. Elizabeth King. She taught my UCC polity class in 2001, and framed for me the idea that the UCC is built on covenant. Tomorrow, I will take up her mantle in teaching this class to a new generation of UCC ministers.
There were four traditions that came together in covenant to form the UCC, and our Congregational churches came in with a strong sense of autonomy and independence. But now, we are graced by the covenant polity that connects us to one another and the UCC.
It is not that the UCC is unique in its emphasis on covenant – it’s just that we put more of our eggs in this basket than other churches. We do not rely upon hierarchy, nor do we have a system in which decisions are made externally. We do not rely on creed, in which only certain beliefs and practices are orthodox. Instead, we put Jesus in the center of our life together and we proclaim that covenant will hold us together, no matter how different we are. That sense of covenant binds us, within the congregation, and binds our congregation to the wider UCC.
Pilgrims I invite you to hear that again. Covenant binds us to one another within Pilgrim Congregational Church. When someone joins this church, they make promises, and you say to them: “We welcome you with joy into the common life of this church. We promise you our friendship and prayers as we share the hopes and labors of the church of Jesus Christ.” Our congregation expands by way of mutual covenant. (And by the way, we’ll be receiving new members later this winter.)
Our covenant to one another as part of Pilgrim Church will be lived out next week, when we meet as a congregation. We will pray, will hear reports, we will pass a budget...and Church Council is bringing a special word on covenant to this gathering, to help us communicate well.
And the covenant is not just internal. We are in covenant, as individual members and as a congregation, with the Metropolitan Boston Association, and with the Southern New England Conference of the UCC, just formed. We are in covenant with our national church. It’s not a matter of authoritarian control, it’s a sacred promise that blesses us and the wider church. We are in covenant, too, with other congregations - with the Burlington UCC church (they gave us pastoral backup during my Christmas break) and the Billerica UCC church, with Hancock (where we’re invited to Mardi Gras) and with Park Ave and with 1st Winchester (which hosts our association office) and 2nd Winchester (whose pastor is a Lahey Chaplain), too - blessed by them and blessing them.
Walter Brueggemann says it this way: “Covenant insists that we are members one of another, pledged in solidarity across ideological lines, and prepared to live in sustained engagement with each other….Covenant is the recognition that all members stand in accountability to a will and purpose” beyond our own - God’s own will and purpose.
It is a mystery, and a wonder, that this works, that covenant really does glue us together. But it does, when we trust God, and we respond to God’s promises with our own.
We are a covenant community, bound together, strengthened by God, greater than the sum of our parts.
God is in the center of our covenant community, calling us to notice, when one of us is in need, calling us to celebrate, calling us to discern, calling us to live justice, calling us to faithfulness, calling us to do more than we can alone.
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God’s steadfast love endures forever.
And our covenant community is strong.
Amen.