

**First Presbyterian Church
Spartanburg, South Carolina
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What Counts: Essential Tenets
God's Covenants: Promises Reliably Made and Honorably Kept
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 21:1-11
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A few years ago, as home prices plummeted and unemployment, foreclosures skyrocketed to never-before-seen heights. People lost their jobs so they could not pay their mortgage. End of story. But at the same time a new trend emerged. Known as a “strategic default,” people who could afford to pay their mortgage decided not to because their homes were so far under water. They simply walked away, handing their keys to the lender. Advocates believe it is simply a matter of making the best financial decision. Why continue to throw tens of thousands down a drain each year? Opponents of strategic default point to the moral issue – you promised you would. Our financial society hinges upon promises reliably made and honorably kept.

But modern society is more like that of Peter Pan in *Hook*. Robin Williams plays Peter Pan who has forgotten who he is. He has become a financier who never shows up to his son Jack's events, despite his many promises. In one scene, Robin Williams insists that this time he will make it, telling Jack, “My word is my bond.” To which Jack retorts, “Yeah, junk bond!” Promises in today's world seem to have become junk bonds.

Noted financial advisor Suze Orman counseled those who were more than 20% under water to simply walk away.

Imagine if God had walked away from us based on how far underwater He was with humanity? But the Lord's promise, known as a covenant, established our relationship with promises reliably made and honorably kept.

No matter what.

Covenants were central to all major relationships in the ancient world. Much of what we know of their cultures comes as result of discovering clay tablets or stone steles such as the Code of Hammurabi from 1700BC, delineating the terms of the relationship between conqueror king and that of the people. These covenants defined the parties involved, listed the great deeds performed by the king for the vassal state, the responsibilities of both the king and the people, the punishments for failure to observe them, a sacrifice to seal the treaty, and a provision for a public reading. Incidentally, for decades, many Presbyterians churches recited the Ten Commandments regularly in worship as a reminder of this covenant and you can instantly see the parallels of the Ten Commandments to this covenantal form.

Throughout scripture we can see God uses covenant to shape our relationship. The simplest form, "I will be your God and you will be my people," is found in our Jeremiah text amongst multiple other places in scripture. Had we walked in perfectly harmony with God, these covenants would not have been necessary. The implicit covenant at the beginning of creation was that Adam and Eve would obey God perfectly, forever. We know how well that went.

So God formed succeeding covenants as others failed. God formed a covenant with Noah never again to destroy the earth, sealed by the sign of the rainbow; God offered the Promised Land to Abraham, sealed by circumcision; God gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai, sealed by sacrifice; God promised King David's throne would be eternal.

In fact, the palm-waving parade for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem sprung from the people's hope that he was the fulfillment of God's covenant with David found in 2 Samuel 7:13, "He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." They hoped a warrior king like David would return to the throne to free Israel of the yoke of oppression. A yoke they were long tired of carrying. One they had carried in some way for 700 years since the fall of Jerusalem. Certainly kings had been restored since then but never like the days of old. Having other kings control their daily lives weighed heavily on the shoulders of a nation.

But this supposed warrior king arrived on a donkey!! A ridiculous-looking-donkey-riding king. It was a sign that surely something was different this time. No fantastic plagues smiting Egypt complete with parting seas, no shepherd-warrior slaying Goliaths, no earth destroying floods and colorful rainbows in the sky. Just a humble servant riding on a donkey.

God decided that a new covenant was needed. For we proved we would never be able to hold up our part of the covenant. We would not live by promises reliably made and honorably kept and God knew this long ago. After the flood God mournfully observed, "The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth."

The people failed to keep the covenant by worshipping other gods and failing to love their neighbor.

God promised this new covenant initially through the Prophet Jeremiah, who spoke in the midst of exile, of homelessness, defeat, and despair. Hopes had been crushed. They built houses in which they did not live. Their treasured land was sown with salt. It was a world of violence of in which parents did not see their children grow old as the text tells us, "Rachel is weeping in Ramah for her children are no more."

The hope was a very earthy, earthly hope. A ruler from their own people. Homes to live in. Children growing old. The fervency of the crowd upon Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was an expression of that hope, of that longing.

Those hopes are not too different from our own. We want an economy in which we can afford to live in the homes we built. We want a country in which we can be confident our

children will grow old, rather than be terrorized at school. We want rulers whose promises are reliably made and honorably kept. In fact a Pulitzer Prize winning organization Politi-fact is dedicated to tracking the promises made and broken by our politicians.

We want these things so badly we will chase after idols to do so. We look for security in the lottery, the Dow with slavish devotion, and pin all of our hopes in the politician or pundit of the week and when they fail to deliver, we kick them to the curb as the next one lines up.

This is the true March Madness that humanity has been playing at since our beginning, and that's why, when this humble king road into the frenzied accolades one day, he found himself on the cross the next.

Palm Sunday reveals the limitation of the human vision, of my vision. We fix our eyes on things of this world: money, home, health, but as important as they are, they are all fleeting. They can be taken away in a moment, and that's why God offered this New Covenant. In fact the whole of the New Testament is simply another name for this New Covenant, the new covenant God offers in Jesus Christ.

Because it is a new covenant

It does not triumph through physical might, but sacrificial love

It does not offer a temporary home, but a house made in the heavens

It is not only for one people, but the whole earth

It does not depend upon our faithfulness, but that of God

In this covenant, God promises to put the law in our hearts, to remember our sins no more, that all will know God from the youngest to the oldest! In the old covenant when one party broke it, the other could break it also.

One person debating strategic default said, "Considering that the reason my home has dropped so precipitously in value is because of poor and unethical decisions made by the very banks themselves, I would feel absolutely zero remorse for dumping my home square in their lap." But this is the divine difference. God's Word is always a promise reliably made and honorably kept, especially in the face of our greatest transgression.

This is the genius of God's covenantal faithfulness. Not only does God not punish, not only does God not abandon us for violating the covenant most profoundly in the murder of Jesus on the cross, but God uses the very act of our defiance to create the new covenant.

Through the great evil and abrogation of old covenant, God established an eternal and unbreakable and new covenant – Unbreakable because it relies on God's faithfulness for both ends of the covenant. God the Father establishes it and Jesus the Son fulfills it. As Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood"! This truly is the supreme example of the sovereignty of God we spoke of a few weeks ago.

Since God has faithfully fulfilled both ends of the covenant, what is left for us? Our fidelity cannot add to it. Our sins cannot detract from it. All that is left for us is to praise God

from whom all blessings flow, to choose freedom rather than fear, to live as those with God's image embedded in our souls, all in order to share the glorious news of this wonderful Covenant God. We do so by living as God intended: by promises reliably made and honorably kept. No matter what.

The Chinese character for integrity is simply the combination of the character for person and the character for word. In other words, a person's word spells their character. Because God's essence is truth, when we live by our word, we introduce people to God.

One man believed deeply in this principle. Dr. Robertson McQuilkin, was the president of Columbia International University in South Carolina for 22 years when, in 1990, his wife Muriel's memory began to degrade. People told him he should get a caretaker or put her in a nursing home. He responded that at their wedding he had promised that "For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and for better or for worse, he will love her, take care and protect her, for as long as they both shall live." And that's just what he did when he resigned his post to care for her full time. In three years she no longer recognized him. On days when her trademark smile appeared, he flew a flag out front because he wanted friends to know this was a smile day. But in the last three or four years, there weren't any smile days. By year 12, she would choke on her food and rarely open her eyes. He continued caring for her until death parted them in 2003. His strength grew from the knowledge that God loves him and sent Jesus into Jerusalem riding on a donkey on that most holy of weeks to die for him. If God loves him this much, he is confident that there is no reason for him to suffer without a purpose. He knew God is faithful and will guide him through the rough times. About serving her for so many years, he never resented it saying, "If I took care of her for forty years, I would never be out of her debt." Because he kept his promise to God, his story inspires us to believe in this promise-keeping God as well.

There is ultimately one story of the Bible, one covenant, the very history of salvation in which God declares, "I will be your God, and you will be my people," for God's promises are reliably made and honorably kept. No matter what. May we do the same to the glory of God. Amen.