

**ADVENT 1C – 12/2/18**  
***A Covenant of Hope***  
**(Jeremiah 33:14-16)**

I've eaten at McDonald's several times in the past couple of weeks, not because I particularly like their food necessarily, but because I have a bad tooth (that I'm getting pulled tomorrow morning, incidentally), and because their breakfast burritos are really soft and easy to chew. *Another* reason is that they offer free Wi-Fi. So I can catch up on all the news and read my emails while I'm eating as well.

Of course, as you know, in places like McDonald's in order to log on to their Wi-Fi, even though it's free, you have to first consent to their "Terms and Conditions" which you have to scroll down and read before clicking "I agree." Now here's a little survey. Raise your hand if you actually *read* those "Terms and Conditions"? Be honest now!

Well to be perfectly honest with you, I *never* read those "Terms and Conditions" even though I probably should. Because they represent a kind of legal contract, if you will. Again, in order to receive this free service you have to agree to abide by certain conditions and limitations.

Well, apparently, I'm not the *only* one who fails to read those "Terms and Conditions." In fact, the Washington Post recently reported that many if not most, of us actually *don't*. In an experiment conducted by the security firm F-Secure, an open Wi-Fi network was set up in a public area. When people connected, however, they were presented with, you guessed it, a lengthy set of terms and conditions. And to see just how little attention most of us pay when checking that agreement box, F-Secure included a so-called "Herod Clause" – one that offered the free

Wi-Fi in exchange for the company's permanent ownership... of the user's firstborn child!

As you might have imagined, nearly everyone clicked "I agree" without ever reading exactly what they were agreeing *to*; namely signing away the life of their firstborn child! Now, of course, they really didn't *want* people to hand over their children; even if everyone who clicked "I agree" *was* contractually obligated; technically speaking. But they did it to prove a point, didn't they? Namely that none of us ever takes the time to read much of what we are agreeing to on a nearly daily basis. None of us typically takes the time to read the "fine print," in other words.

But sometimes, unfortunately, the results of not doing so are not at all humorous. Ten years ago, in August of 2008, I accepted a new call and made the move from Atlanta, Georgia to northeastern Ohio. The timing couldn't have been worse, however. That fall the Great Recession hit full force, the housing market tanked, and our home – just listed for sale – suddenly became *unsellable*.

To make matters worse, on top of paying on a mortgage down in Georgia (where Jeanette and Kaitlin had temporarily stayed behind), and rent up in Ohio where *I* was now living, I also suffered a heart attack shortly after arriving which brought with it a whole *new* set of bills to be paid. Then, when our finances were just about stretched to the breaking point, Jeanette was suddenly terminated from her public school teaching job down in Georgia when her principal caught wind of our impending move. And Georgia being a state *without* a teacher's union, Jeanette had absolutely no recourse open to her.

So with our household income cut by over a third, a mortgage down in Georgia, rent up in Ohio, and assorted hospital and doctor's bills from my heart attack not covered by our insurance, some months later we were ultimately forced into bankruptcy. But that's not even the worst part... believe it or not!

In the process of filing *for* bankruptcy our attorneys did not alert us to something which would, ultimately, prove costly – not only to *us* but to our two oldest daughters who were both in college at the time, as well. You see, on top of the grants and scholarships both had earned, plus what we as parents were able to afford to help them, they also had to take out some student loans in order to pay for college. Not ideal, perhaps, but nothing out of the ordinary either given the *cost* of education these days.

Nor did we even give it a second thought when I co-signed for those college loans. Who *would have* or *could have* ever foreseen what was later to transpire?

But here's where I made such a serious and tragic mistake. One that, as I say, not even our attorneys caught, although that's no excuse. You see, I hadn't read the fine print on those college loans I had co-signed. If I *had*, I would have known that the moment I filed for bankruptcy those loans went immediately into default. I had, in other words, violated the terms and conditions of those college loans. And instead of being repaid normally *after* our daughters had graduated from college, and presumably were working and therefore *able* to repay them, those loans were now due *right then and there!* And since neither they, nor we, were able to repay the tens of thousands of dollars of student loans owed between the two of them, this debt was now transferred to collection

agencies, and we had to negotiate monthly repayment plans that we are still paying on to this day; some nine years later.

So contracts are serious business. Or at least they can be. And there are often consequences, sometimes serious consequences, if the terms of some contracts are not met.

Well, a *covenant* is a kind of contract. The word is of Latin origin – con-vinere – which means a “coming together.” It describes the process where two or more parties “come together” to agree on promises, stipulations, privileges and responsibilities. Often these two terms – covenant and contract – are used almost interchangeably in everyday language and conversation. But in a religious, or biblical sense, they are actually quite different; at least in describing the relationship between God and God’s people.

And here’s the difference. *Contracts* are broken when one of the parties fails to keep their promise. Like when I was no longer able to make the mortgage payments on my house down in Georgia. As a consequence, as part of my bankruptcy filing, I forfeited my ownership; I had to hand the house back over to the bank.

But with a *covenant* – in a biblical sense, that is – the relationship with God is *not* ended or severed even *if* the terms are not met or God’s people fail to keep their promises.

For example, let’s say a patient fails to keep an appointment with his or her doctor. The doctor is not *obligated* to call that person’s house and ask, “Where were you? Why didn’t you show up for your appointment?” No. The doctor simply goes on to the next patient

without any obligation to that person whatsoever. Although in recent years, I've noticed, most doctors have policies whereby they actually *charge you* if you fail to keep a scheduled appointment without giving 24 hours notice. In addition, that patient may find it more difficult the next time to *see* that doctor because he or she broke an informal contract.

According to the Bible, however, a "covenant" is more like the ties between a parent and a child; than it is to a doctor's appointment. As Bruce Shelley has noted, if a child fails to show up for dinner, for instance, the parent's obligation, unlike the doctor's, isn't cancelled. Of course not. The parent will immediately try to find out where that child is, and make sure that the child is safe and sound. In other words, the child's failure to show up for dinner does not terminate or nullify the relationship.

A covenant, again the biblical covenant with God, in the same way, puts no conditions or restrictions on faithfulness. It represents God's *unconditional* commitment to love and serve. Or as God says in Isaiah 49:15, "Can a mother forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget," says the Lord, "yet I will not forget you." Again, a contract can be broken. But our covenant with God... cannot.

Interestingly enough, I have just been talking about covenants in our catechism class. You see, there are five main covenants with God described in scripture. And each of them carries with it either a "sign" or a process of "renewal."

First, of course, there was the covenant with Noah. The world was evil and God threatened to destroy human life with a great flood. But, in the end, God chose instead to save humanity and all creation through Noah and his family. And God then entered into a *covenant* with all living creatures and promised to never again destroy life on earth with a flood. And as a sign of this promise God put the rainbow in the sky. (Even though human beings continued to rebel and do evil things, however. But God... remained faithful.)

Then there was the covenant with Abraham and Sarah; that their descendants would be many and that they would be “blessed to be a blessing.” As a sign of this promise male Hebrew babies are circumcised. (Again, they continued to be blessed by God even though God’s people did not always deserve to *be* blessed in this way. But God remained faithful.)

Then there was the covenant with Moses and all of Israel. God freed them from slavery in Egypt and entered into a covenant with them whereby God promised to be their God and they promised to be God’s people. As part of that covenant, God gave the people the law, the Ten Commandments to follow and to obey. (Even though, again, they continually failed to hold up their end of the bargain and continued to disobey God. But God... remained faithful.)

Then there was the covenant with David. God promised King David that one of his descendants would rule forever over the people. In fact, it’s precisely this covenant that is referred to in our first reading this morning from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Things were not good at the time when the prophet spoke these words. The unfaithfulness and disobedience of God’s people had resulted in defeat and captivity.

But even in the midst of such despair, God reaffirms this covenantal promise: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land...”

Which brings us to the fifth and final covenant in the Bible; the *new* covenant represented by Jesus Christ – the righteous Branch promised by the prophet Jeremiah centuries before. Through baptism, *we* become members of this covenant. Through Holy Communion we are nourished *in* this covenant. And the signs of this covenant are water, bread, and wine.

In such covenants, again – specifically the kind of covenants we find in the Bible between God and God’s people – unfaithfulness or failure to keep up one’s end of the bargain does not nullify or cancel the relationship. When I failed to make my mortgage payments, the contract was broken and the bank foreclosed on my house. But, in sharp contrast, even if – or more like *when* – we fail to fulfill the promises we make with God, believe it or not, God will never withdraw *God’s* promises. In other words, God continues to bless our lives and to love us unconditionally no matter *how* disobedient or unfaithful we may be.

Thus, freed from any fear that we might somehow *lose* God’s loving grace and favor by somehow failing to keep our promises, we are also set free then to commit our lives to God and to God’s church without ever worrying about how things will turn out in the end. As I like to tell our catechism students, “There is nothing we can do to make God love

us more. And there is absolutely nothing we can ever do to make God love us *less!*”

Which brings us, at last, to our Hope Family Covenant that’s leaning up here against the communion rail this morning, awaiting your signatures. And a tradition that began in 1970. This practice of recommitting ourselves to the ministry of the congregation on an annual basis was first popularized in the 1960’s, back when Hope was being organized. In response to all that God has done for *us*, we then promise to do certain things and to make certain commitments in return. Among those commitments we agree to:

- Actively participate in the worship services and programs of the church.
- Make diligent use of the Means of Grace – (in other words) God’s Word and Sacraments – Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
- Prayerfully consider giving a proportion of our substance to support the work of the Congregation and The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- Live a Christian life in accord with God’s Word.
- Assume a ministry for Christ as dictated by our talents.

The document then ends: “This is our covenant with God and by the help of God.” *A covenant... not a contract.*

If you ever, for some reason, become less active in the ministry and programs of the congregation – or even completely *inactive* – this will never cancel or nullify God’s love or forgiveness in your lives. Nor will we revoke your baptism, if that were even possible.



And if you were to make *less* than diligent use of the means of grace, God's Word and Sacraments, this will never make you less of a Christian or signal somehow that God now *loves* you less.

And if you ever find it impossible to meet your estimate of giving because of the loss of a job or a change in your financial status or situation, we are never going to come looking for your money as if this were somehow a contract to be enforced. (I actually had a member in one of my congregations come to me privately in tears because her husband had just been fired and she was upset that they could no longer fulfill their offering pledge. However, as that phrase on those orange commitment cards plainly states: "This plan is gratefully received and may be *altered* at any time." Or for any reason.)

And if you ever make a mistake in life, even a terrible one, you will never forfeit God's promises made to us through Jesus Christ. That's what forgiveness is all about. That's what his dying on the cross overcame.

Or if you fail, at some point, to find or fulfill a ministry in the life of the congregation, this will never nullify, or sever, or send your covenant with God into default.

It just can't happen. Why?

Because we're talking about a *covenant* here. Not a contract. Contracts can be broken. Covenants cannot. Not because of *our* faithfulness, of course. But because of *God's*. God's promises still remain in force even if we default on ours.

And what that means is that we have the freedom to make promises and commitments to God *even if* we can't guarantee they will be fulfilled. And what this also means, of course, is that when we mess up and fail... we get a chance to start all over again; to make new promises and new commitments. Because God is a *God* of fresh starts and new beginnings.

When I failed to meet the requirements of my mortgage years ago, I forfeited the right to ever live in that house again. I broke a contract; made it null and void.

But whenever we fail to fulfill the promises we make to God, or even to this congregation for that matter, *God's* promises are nevertheless still in effect. They are never revoked. And we will always have the hope of living in the house of God... *forever*.

Amen.