

June 14, 2020 – Exodus 19:2-8

What is a covenant? You've probably heard this word before. In church, in Bible study, in a book or sermon or song. It comes up a lot in God's Word. And there are some very common descriptions of it.

Most often, we hear it described as a contract or a promise. Marriage is described as a covenant between a husband and wife, and between them and God. The Divine Call between a church worker and a congregation is sometimes described as a covenant. Again, a covenant between the two parties and between them and God.

This is all well and good... in English. That's basically a correct usage of the word. But it doesn't really capture the meaning of the word in Hebrew that we usually translate as "covenant." That word, in Hebrew, is "bərith" and it shows up at a key moment in our Old Testament lesson today.

But, before we get into this word, a little bit of context might be helpful. The book of Exodus can basically be divided in half, with chapters 1-18 in one half and chapters in 19-40 in the other. Basically right down the middle.

The first half is the story of God rescuing Israel from Egypt, and all the mighty works he did. The 10 plagues. The pillars of fire and cloud. The parting of the Red Sea. Manna from heaven. Water from a rock. It's a laundry list of miracles. Highly entertaining to read.

And then chapter 19 starts. And the book gets... boring. Don't get me wrong. It's no less important. But the narrative – the story – all but ends at chapter 19. And for the rest of the book, we get God's instructions to Moses. Instructions for how to keep his "bərith."

And that begins right here in our reading with verse 5. *"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my [bərith], you shall be my treasured possession among all people."* So what is this "bərith" and why am I avoiding calling it a covenant?

Well, I'm avoiding the word covenant because it's just not a very complete translation. It's by far the most common translation. It's been used since the King James Version. But that doesn't mean it's good.

So why do we keep using it? Well, because there isn't a single word in English that captures the meaning of "bərith" better than "covenant" does. And since "bərith" does involve the idea of a contract or a promise, the way that a covenant does, that's the word we've settled on as the best of a lot of bad options.

But there's so much more to it. Because "bərith" also involves concepts like that of a royal edict. The proclamation of a king to his subjects. And it can also be used to describe the terms of surrender after a battle. When a king conquered a city, he issued a "bərith" to the city's inhabitants, telling them in no uncertain terms, "I am your king now. This is what you will do for me. End of discussion."

And, if we're watching for it, we see that at work in this passage from Exodus. Because God begins his message to the Israelites by saying, *"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians."*

Oh yeah, they saw. And it was terrifying. Rivers of blood. Frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts. Boils and disease. Hail and darkness. The death of every firstborn in Egypt. And the drowning of Pharaoh's entire army. It was horrifying. As gruesome as any war that has ever been waged. God didn't just free them from Egypt. God conquered Egypt. God brought Egypt to its knees.

But as for Israel, he bore them out on eagles' wings and brought them to himself. When the Egyptian livestock died, the Israelite livestock remained healthy. When hail fell in huge storms that killed man and beast, only the land where the Israelites lived was spared. When darkness covered Egypt, there remained light in the homes of the Israelites. And when the Lord came for their firstborns, he passed over the homes of all His people.

He made it abundantly clear that his people were special. His people were chosen. His people were loved. And after his battle with Pharaoh was over, he intended to carry them out of Egypt as the spoils of war.

But unlike other kings, who might carry away the population of a city and issue a *bərith* that declared them to be his slaves, God issues a very different *bərith* to Israel: *“You will be my treasured possession among all peoples... You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

Yes, he was carrying them away from Egypt as his property, but not as slaves making bricks and building pyramids. No, they were his treasured possession. All the earth is his. All the earth belongs to him. All the earth and every one in it is God's property. But the Israelites were special. They were treasured. They were loved.

They had been conquered. Captured. Carried away from a defeated king. To be ruled by a new king. By the king of kings. And this new king had made clear his intention to treat them far better than their old king. He had issued to them a *bərith* more generous and loving than any the world had ever seen before.

But there was a clause that preceded it all: *“If you obey my voice and keep my bərith.”* This shouldn't be read as a tit-for-tat, quid-pro-quo kind of contract. God is not saying that his love can only be guaranteed by their obedience.

God is simply stating the fact that his love and generosity as king only extends to those who are in his kingdom. If you want to be treasured then you have to remain his possession. If you want to become his kingdom of priests and his holy nation, then you have to first remain his. If you want him to be your king, then you have to obey him as your king. And *“all the people answered together and said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do.'”*

Yet, despite their enthusiastic agreement, this was something that Israel would struggle to carry out. It's something that humanity would struggle to carry out. All the way back to the days of Adam. We've struggled to grasp this truth.

Paul talks about this in our Epistle. God is a God of life. But those who choose death will die. It was true of Adam. And it has been true of every one of Adam's descendants. You sin. You die. It's pretty straightforward.

But still, we die. Because we are weak. We are sinners. We are enemies of God. Those are the three ways that Paul describes us apart from the work of Christ. Weak. Sinners. And enemies of God.

We are too weak, too helpless in the face of temptation, to obey God's commands. We are too sinful, too corrupt in heart and mind, to do what God requires of us. We are enemies of God's will, too proud and self-righteous, to do anything but our own will.

And so after being called God's treasured possession, after being promised a future as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, we were brought under God's wrath. We were brought under that same wrath that consumed and destroyed Pharaoh and his army.

Until God proclaimed to us a new *bərith*. Until, instead of bringing us to him, he came to us, in flesh and blood. Sat down with us. Lifted up bread and wine with us. And declared, *“This cup is the new [bərith] in my blood.”* This cup is the new covenant. The new promise. The new royal proclamation. The new terms of your surrender.

But it's not made in your blood, shed in your death. It's not made in an animal's blood on an altar, shed in its death. It's made in my blood, shed in my death on the cross.

It's made in the blood of him who has the power to conquer not just Egypt, Pharaoh, and his armies. But in the blood of him who has the power to conquer sin, death, and the devil. It's made in the blood of him who died and rose again so that we might be purchased from our slavery to sin and freed from the gates hell itself.

Jesus declared a new b̄erith to us because he had conquered a whole new enemy and given us a whole new sort of freedom. And now we, his church, have been born on eagles' wings and brought in to his presence. And now we, his church, are once again his treasured possession among all peoples. And now we, his church, are once again a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

What is a covenant? It's not just a promise. It's not just a contract. When it's God making the covenant – when it's God making a b̄erith – it is him declaring who you are to him. It is him declaring what he will do for you. It is him declaring that he is your God and you are his people. And nothing in all the world will change that. Not sin, not the devil, not even death itself. Because that is how great his love is for you. Amen.