

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: A New Covenant

Anthony Ballard

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Scripture:

Hebrews 8:6-13

⁶ But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said^[a]:

“The days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

⁹ It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they did not remain faithful to my covenant,
and I turned away from them,
declares the Lord.

¹⁰ This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.
I will put my laws in their minds
and write them on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

¹¹ No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.

¹² For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."^[b]

¹³ By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete
and outdated will soon disappear.

Transcript:

Those of you online, good to have you joining us. My name's Anthony Ballard. I'm the Director of Discipleship here at BelPres and Happy Memorial Day. Good to see people. You guys actually came. You showed up. Thank you.

The scripture today comes from Hebrews chapter 8, verse 6 through 13, "The covenant of which Jesus is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For there it had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would've been sought for another. But God found fault with his people and said, 'The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel. After that time, declares the Lord, I will ... '"

Sorry I lost my place.

"After that time I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more.' By calling this covenant new, he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear."

Lord Jesus, I thank you for your word. We thank you Jesus, that you bring to us a new covenant, a new way of life, a new way of being. So help us to do this so that we can live out being just neighbors in our community, in our world. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen. So the series that we're in right now is called Just Neighbors, and it's a sermon series about justice, about discipleship and about land. And it's specifically about how do disciples of Jesus inhabit the places, the land that we live on, and how do we do that in a way that heals the injustice that the land has experienced?

And here at BelPres, we talk about six marks of a disciple. And specifically we're learning what can we do to heal the historic injustices of redlining and racially restrictive covenants in our region. And the covenant is a key word in the passage that we just read. And so I'm going to use that word a lot. So before we keep going, I want to define what it means. A covenant is an agreement or a partnership between God and human beings, and they have physical and spiritual implications. And covenants also come with terms and agreements for both God and for the people. And the most common form of covenant that we see today is what we call marriage. And the last time I preached, I told you that I got

married back in December, which means that I entered into a covenant. And the vows that Sarah and I made with each other are the promises, the terms that make up our covenant with each other. And so when decorating our apartment, I have put some pictures on the wall and there's one particular picture of our ... a marriage photo. And in that frame, I have our vows around it so we can always remember what we promised to each other.

One day Sarah and I were having an argument. We were arguing about something that I honestly, I can't even remember what it was, but she wanted me to do something that I didn't want to do. And so in the middle of our argument, she actually got up from the couch and she walked over to the picture frame and she started reading my vows back to me. She tried to use my vows against me. But thankfully I knew that going into marriage that Sarah and I took marriage very seriously. And so when I wrote my vows, I didn't write anything over the top that I couldn't actually live out. I challenged myself, but I wasn't ridiculous. But the key here is that Sarah wanted me to hold true to the thing that I had promised to live out. She wanted me to keep the agreements and the promises of our covenant. In Christian weddings, this is why we say that when people are getting married, they're making their covenant before God, which is the spiritual, before family and friends, which is the physical because covenants have spiritual and physical power. And sometimes because of that, sometimes we need to remind ourselves of what our covenants actually say.

And in the Old Testament of the Bible, there's four covenants that God makes with humans, and he makes these with four different people. The first covenant is with Noah, and it's a promise that God makes with Noah that he will never again destroy the earth through the floods. And then he makes a covenant with Abraham wherein he tells Abraham to leave his home and that he will give him a good land to inhabit and God will bless him. He's going to make his name great among the nations.

And then there's a covenant with Moses, and this is a covenant God makes with Israel through Moses, in that they will be his chosen people and they will represent him to the nations, but they had to keep his commands, the 10 commandments and the rest of the law. And then there's a covenant with King David. When King David, God promises that his descendants will carry on the kingdom of Israel forever. And specifically God tells him that one of his descendants will have an everlasting kingdom that will see no end, and that is a foretelling of Jesus and the kingdom of God.

So these four covenants span hundreds of years, and these covenants didn't only cover Noah or Abraham, but they covered the generations of people because God's covenants are future minded. And these covenants usually came with some type of sign or a seal that will let people know that the covenant happened. Like for Noah, the covenant sign was a

rainbow. And with Abraham, it was circumcision for all the men. I don't know about you, but if I have to make a covenant with God, I'd much rather have a rainbow be the sign of my covenant than adult circumcision. Like did Abraham even ask God, "Can I have a rainbow instead? Maybe we can make it a double rainbow so I don't have to go through that." He should have asked. It's not in scripture though.

But because the God of the Bible is intentional, he makes covenants with us to make our relationship official. And so every relationship, these are serious covenants. They're not these throwaway kind of contracts, but they make relationships official and they change realities. That's why God puts terms on his covenants because without these terms he has to, because without these terms it can lead to abuse. Any relationship without boundaries leads to some type of abuse. So this is where I would like us to look closer at the covenant that God makes with Abraham.

The covenant was that God will make his name great, that he would bless him, and specifically that God will give him land to inhabit, a good land to inhabit. But Abraham and his family had to follow the Lord's terms. And in Genesis 18:19, it says that, "For I have chosen Abraham, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

To have the promises of God, specifically to have the land, Abraham and his family had to be people of righteousness and people of justice. And the reason was because the nation surrounding them were people who practiced injustice. They were built on that. And so they would be marked as people of God by doing justice or to use our BelPres language to heal injustice.

And Abraham would've had a lot of people in his household too. He would've had servants and people living with him, even though he didn't have children yet. But all of these people that lived with him had to keep the way of the Lord and be righteous and just people. So Abraham would have to teach his future children how to do this. So that's why it's important for parents to be discipling your kids. Church can help, but it's parents that are the most critical part of it. Because Abraham's covenant wasn't just for him, it was for the future generations to come because God doesn't just deal with individuals. He deals with whole communities, he deals with neighborhoods. And it says, "For I have chosen Abraham, so that he will direct his children, his household to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice."

And in all four covenants that God made with Noah, with Abraham, Moses, David, human screwed it up, every single time. So God would say, "Teach your children," because it

maybe wasn't necessarily the people that the covenant were made with, but somewhere down the line, those future generations would mess it up because they forgot the way of the Lord, or because the way of the Lord wasn't taught to the children. So these people would go on to worship other gods, they would practice injustices and they would face the consequences of their sin. But this is where the beauty of God covenants comes in. No matter what humans did, no matter how egregious their breaking of the covenant is, God always kept his side of the promise every time. And to this day, he still does.

So it's the spiritual side of covenants that actually show us how covenants shape realities, which brings us back to the theme of this sermon series, Just Neighbors in the history of redlining and restrictive covenants.

See, in housing, there's these covenants that if you're a buyer, there are these agreements between buyers and sellers and saying that I will use this property for this or I won't use it for that. And some of you, for instance, can't even paint your house red without freaking out or breaking a covenant with your neighbors. And nationally, there's been a particularly evil covenant known as racially restrictive covenants. And these prevented people who were not white from living in certain neighborhoods. And these existed and they were illegal for most of the 20th century. This even happened here locally in Seattle on the east side and closer here in Bellevue, in some cases, even a few blocks away from this very church.

These properties would say things that this cannot be leased or sold or rented to specifically naming Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Jewish or Black people. And even though the Fair Housing Act made these illegal, we are still feeling the effects of these covenants today because they've shaped our neighborhoods, they shaped our schools, and in some cases even our churches. So while it's illegal, the injustice has not been healed.

And last week, Pastor Scott in his sermon, he talked about this in more depth. So I encourage you, if you haven't seen it yet, to go back and watch what he said. And you can visit on our website, belpres.org/justice, and it'll have more a deeper dive of the research that has gone into this.

I encourage you as you're learning to really be thinking about where am I hearing exclusionary language happen or discussions happen, whether in your schools, your neighborhoods, your jobs. It's happening. And how can we begin to listen for it and stand against it?

There's one particular restrictive covenant that I want to read, and it happened in Seattle. And reading it really struck me to the physical power of covenants, I should say the physical and spiritual power of covenants. And the language is outdated, but more specifically, the language is evil. And it says: The parties here to signing and executing this instrument

hereby mutually covenant promise and agree with the others and for the respective heirs and assigns that no part of set lands owned by them shall never be used, occupied, or sold by, leased, conveyed, rented or given to Negroes or any persons of a Negro blood.

Do you see this? These people actually understood covenant. They understood the power of covenant because just like the covenants God makes, this one's thinking about the future. It's thinking about the futures that come, the heirs and the assigns that will come after this, not just one transaction but all transactions going forward. These covenants shape the makeup of our region and they shape the existence of us now. And as Julie Metz has said in a video, she said that the existence of these covenants are antithetical to the kingdom of God. And I agree.

We got to remember, covenants are promises and agreements that we make between God and humans, and they have physical and spiritual implications. So if we live in the environments established on these racially restricted covenants, we have to ask the question, have we made agreements with the wrong spiritual beings? Have we made partnerships with these wrong beings?

Ephesians 5:11 tells us, "Don't take part in fruitless works of darkness, but instead expose them." This is why we have to talk about this in church because evil is aggressive and it's intentional. So doing what is right and doing what is just needs to be intentional.

So we can break partnerships with these spiritual forces and make the right partnerships with God. And let me tell you, these are covenants worth breaking.

A few months ago, a team of congregants and lifelong elders who are leading this initiative, were searching for a way to help you all, for homeowners, search up your property and look for restrictive language. But the process is really complicated and it's kind of boring and no one would've done it. But then we had this God connection and we were introduced to a local title, an escrow company called BKCO, and they heard about the work we were doing and they jumped in to help us with this project. And they are offering their services for free, but they also are offering to check for anyone's any restrictive covenant language in your property, and they'll help you remove it. And on top of that, they will also enable you to add new and inclusive covenants to your property. So if you own this property, you can write a new covenant for your home.

So we are encouraging everyone to take time to peripherally consider what do you want your home to be about? What new covenant do you want to establish for your house? And the form to do this is on our website that you can follow there. There's a team of people who will be in the lobby after services who can talk with you and answer any questions.

But we've made this process as simple as possible. But here's the thing. It's still a process that you have to go through. The covenants won't magically appear with a click of a button. You have to actually do it, and then you have to actually live it because that's what makes it a covenant and not just a casual statement.

Also, if you live in an apartment like I do, you can also write a more personalized covenant for your home. What do you want your apartment to be about? And how can you use your living in this apartment community as a way to bring justice and healing to your community and the schools around your apartment? You can replace your Eat, Pray, Love sign with a new covenant on your wall. Millennials get that joke. Maybe some of the other ones do, but apartment people, I would also say for us apartment living people that we can also have conversations with people that we know that own homes and they can learn about this as well.

The president of BKCO is a man named Darren. And Darren and I had lunch recently and we talked about everything from Jesus to justice to Air Jordans. And he said that the reason he's excited for his team to be helping us with this project, he said, "This is an opportunity for people to tell a new story for our region. And it's an opportunity for us to ask the question, what do we want our property to say to the world?" Darren also said that this project would help get him back into church. And so at 11 o'clock, he's going to be here today in worship, which I'm excited about.

There's a map that has certain dots where all the old covenants existed. And this represents all the old language that is all over the place in Seattle. You can see this map on our website, and it's covered in this racist language. But imagine a new map where it tells a new story of people committing to keep the way of the Lord, to be healers of injustice, not just on their home, but in their whole neighborhood, in the community around them.

There's a researcher that says that racially restrictive covenants haunt Seattle. And this whole project, the New Covenant project, was inspired by Hebrews 8:13, and it says, "By calling this covenant new, Jesus has made the first one obsolete and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear."

And many of you know Linda Fluke. She's sitting right here. She's a prayer minister here at this church. She's been a part of BelPres since the '50s, since the beginning of this church. And she grew up in Bellevue, and she lived here when these covenants were still legal and enforceable. And she didn't know the depth of which Bellevue had this racial injustice that existed.

And now Linda lives in Kirkland, and the property that she owns does not have racially restrictive language, but still, Linda had a house of prayer in her home. She invited us, some

of us over to pray with her, and she also wrote a personal new covenant for her home that you can read on the website.

But the covenant that will live on her deed sounds like this: I declare that every human being has the right to own a house. It's a fundamental aspect of human dignity and a basic necessity of life. Let it be known that discrimination in housing will not be tolerated and that all individuals to have the right to choose where they live. This will stand as a testament to my commitment to ensuring that every person has the opportunity to attain their desire of homeownership. Anyone who wishes to purchase this home from me is hereby eligible, regardless of race, religion, or socioeconomic status. This is my covenant and I stand by it. That language will live on the actual deed of Linda's home. And one day, if someone buys the property from Linda, they will read that language and they may choose to remove it or they'll choose to live it out.

A few people have asked me, "Aren't these covenants things just virtue signal signaling?" Like, "Aren't you just saying stuff to look good and sound good?" But virtue signaling happens when you make a statement and have no intention of carrying it out, kind of like a ... It's a sign though like when you wear a wedding ring. A wedding ring is the sign of the covenant. I have to actually live this out. I hope I'm living it out. I'm living it out, Sarah, right? She clapped. She clapped. This isn't virtue signaling, right? And so if you know Linda Fluke, you know that she's a disciple and she's going to live this out. We are encouraging all of you to live it out.

The Apostle Paul said in Corinthians that the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but it's of power. So this is an invitation to covenant, not to contract, not to statements. But whether it's in marriage, whether it's in housing, covenants have spiritual and physical power and they shape realities. And this is not only for BelPres. This can be for other churches and other people in our local community as well.

So God knew. God knew that the four covenants he made with Abraham, Moses, Noah, and King David, that at some point someone would break the covenant, whether them or the descendants. And he also knew that several millennia later that here in Seattle that people would write and uphold racially restrictive covenants that would prevent people made in his image from living on land that he created. Can you believe it? The audacity. He knew this was going to happen. Yet he always remains faithful to his part of the covenants that he makes. And he remained faithful most importantly by sending us Jesus.

So Hebrews 8 tells us that "the covenant of which Jesus is mediator is superior to the old one since the new covenant is established on better promises. The days are coming, declares the

Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah."

God has had his covenants broken through multiple generations and multiple times, yet he's so bent on loving and partnering with his people. This new covenant that we get from Jesus is that Jesus on the cross took all the consequences, all the sin, all the effects of those breaking those covenants. He's taken them on himself.

So it's Jesus who actually brings the promises of the old covenants to all of us. It's Jesus that brings the blessings of the covenant of Abraham. And it's Jesus who is the king of the kingdom that was promised to King David. And his kingdom is coming with justice and with peace and with righteousness for all people everywhere.

"This covenant," Hebrew says, "I will establish with the people of Israel. And after that time declares the Lord, I will put my laws on their minds. I'll write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to one another, 'Know the Lord' because they will all know me. From the least of them to the greatest for I'll forgive their wickedness, and remember their sin no more."

This is the new covenant that we have in Jesus. And it can be that way. As disciples, we can represent this for our whole entire region. And I do believe that something happens that when we let the reality of what Jesus has done, the new covenant that he brings, overtake our lives, and then we live that out in our communities, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, in our apartment buildings, we can be the just neighbors and write that new story that our region needs.

So I want to close with an action step. And this action step is not ... You don't have to do this out of any religious obligation. There's no obligation. It's only gratitude that we do this. So the action step is that in light of Jesus being the ultimate covenant keeper, pray. Pray and ask him how he wants to use you to be a just neighbor. What things can you be hearing and seeing for that's happening? And then you and your family sit down, write a new covenant of how you will live in light of racial restrictive covenants and tell a new story for our region. And then we go and live as just neighbors. We live this thing out. And so it's a covenant that is written in the deeds of our homes, but most importantly is a covenant that is written in our hearts and in our minds. Amen. So let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the covenant keeper, the covenant bringer, and we get to live in that. And so, Lord, help us to be the just neighbors that you call us to be and tell a new story for our region, a story of hope, a story of justice, and a story of peace.

Lord, we thank you for this region of Seattle and we have hope for it. And so, Lord, use us to bring your name glory. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question: What is a specific scent that always triggers a memory for you of a certain person, time or place?

Opening Question: Looking back to last's week's sermon and scripture...How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

For Further Study: Genesis 15; Genesis 18:19. See also www.belpres.org/justice.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- God always keeps his covenants, but people don't always do that well. Can you think of a covenant that you have been part of that has been hard to keep? What have you learned about God in this process? What have you learned about yourself?
- Whether you own or rent, if you were to create a new covenant for your home, what would you include?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.