

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS OF FAITHFULNESS

I Kings 8

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The word “covenant” is not a word we use day-to-day. I say the word “covenant” in two circumstances - I say it in Bible Study, most often when we are studying the Old Testament, and I say it in marriage ceremonies. In both situations, the meaning is the same. A **covenant** is a **sacred promise**.

We know about the sacred promises made in marriage. One person promises to the other to live faithfully by the other’s side, no matter what might happen - whether things get worse or better, whether they are sick or healthy, whether they become richer or poorer. When two people live out these sacred promises well, when they are at their best, their marriage becomes a solid foundation, a place where each of them feels safe and secure. The trust that develops between two people, in the best of times, creates the environment for each of them to live up to their full potential. I love reading this quote at weddings: “Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire.” It doesn’t matter where the couple physically lives, how many times they move, what their house looks like, their **relationship** is their **home**.

In the Old Testament, the word “covenant” means a sacred promise between God and the people Israel. Simply put, God says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” But then, the **terms** of the relationship are spelled out. God says, “This is the content of my promise. I promise you a land, I promise you descendants to live in that land. I promise to be with you, no matter what.”

There are no one-way covenants. Now it's the people of Israel's turn. They promise to live according to the laws and commandments, beginning with the first one: "Have no other gods. Put me at the center of your life."

The commandments are not in any way a punishment, any more than marriage vows are a punishment. They are given in love from a loving God, who says, "I want you to experience a sense of shalom, well-being, health and wholeness; I want you to live in harmony, peace and justice. All you have to do is follow these commandments and that will happen. You don't even have to figure it out for yourself. I'll write them down for you." And then God even makes it easier. "There are 613 laws, but I'll give you a shortcut. Just focus on these 10, and if you can do that, you'll be alright." Those are the terms to our two-way covenant relationship with God.

**Communication** is the key to **any** good relationship. Whether with a spouse or partner, friend, child, or co-worker, you have to learn to articulate what you want and need from someone if you're going to have a satisfying relationship. When we love someone, we sometimes find it hard to communicate. We're so afraid of hurting the other person's feelings that we avoid difficult conversations.

One thing I love about the Old Testament is that its characters don't hold back with God. They tell God what they think and feel; they don't worry about hurting God's feelings. So we have psalms of lament in which people say, "Where are you, God? I feel like you've completely abandoned me."

In our passage for today, King Solomon speaks **boldly** to God. Now, he's probably feeling pretty self-confident. The occasion is the dedication of the temple, often called **his** temple. He has overseen its construction, and it is huge, elaborate and

ornate. It contains gold, bronze, ivory, and wood carvings. It has taken a lot of time and money to build, and finally the work is finished. The dedication of the temple is part worship service and part celebration - a celebration that lasts eight days - and Solomon gives a long prayer of dedication that is more like a speech. From what he says, we know that he is a person of faith, who knows God's values. He dedicates the temple as a place of prayer and reconciliation for the people of Israel AND for foreigners living in Israel. Even as he is dedicating this majestic building, Solomon says that God's spirit is not contained in buildings.

But listen to what he says next. He embarks upon a series of seven examples of times when people need God. He describes each one in detail. He talks about times of drought, times of war, and - in the portion Beau read for us this morning - he talks about famines and plagues and pestilence — and he says this to God, “God, when these things happen, these terrible things, and when we pray, we want you, we expect you to listen to us.” Hear us. Engage with us, God. Let us know that you're not ignoring us.

It's a fascinating prayer. Solomon doesn't say, “God, when plagues come, we want you to take them away from us quickly.” No. He talks to God boldly, but all he asks is that God listen. Solomon is affirming that prayer is an effective antidote for every form of disaster. Solomon is saying to himself, and to the people he governs, that living in an active, trusting relationship with God provides hope in the midst of any kind of disaster. Solomon doesn't demand action of God. **He demands God.** God's presence.

It is all spoken in the context of trust, because Solomon understands covenant. It may *sound* disrespectful, but Solomon reminds God to uphold God's end of the bargain. Be our God. Be the God you promised to be.

And then at the end of this long prayer...the book of I Kings says that Solomon had been kneeling the whole time with his hands spread out to heaven...when he finally gets up, he says to the people of Israel, "And we will do our part too. **We will** walk in God's ways; **we will** keep the laws and commandments. It is what God has told us to do. It's our covenant promise."

I'm sure that you see the connection between our present circumstance and this passage of scripture. We are plagued. We are plagued, literally, with a virus that has robbed now over a million people worldwide of their lives. On this World Communion Sunday, think of it. Over a million people worldwide have died of this plague. We are plagued by other disasters, too, some of which we have contributed to, like the perilous state of the planet. Our nation is plagued by injustice and bitter division. And how about if we consider what plagues us personally? Worries about how we'll survive the winter. Anxieties about our jobs, our finances. We are plagued, aren't we? And we want it all to go away. And this answer from the Bible seems, frankly, insufficient. God is with us. And we're supposed to follow the commandments.

What if this is exactly the answer we need? The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that this biblical passage is good news in these two ways. One - it directs us towards the future, affirming that the plague, the virus, **will not** have the last word; **it will not** keep us from living the abundant life God intends for us. And this

passage changes the subject. No longer is our focus on COVID and all of its tentacles. Our attention turns back towards God who **never** lets death and evil ultimately prevail.

What if we were to let go, even for a few minutes a day, of our worry and anxiety and remember that God is our faithful partner? The next time you feel like you just can't handle one more negative news story, one more heart-racing nightmare, say to yourself, "Be still and know that I am God." Try it now. Breathe deeply, and remember these words from the psalms, "Be still and know that I am God."

Once you're feeling calm again, once you're feeling centered, then you might realize God is looking at you and saying, "See, I'm here. I'm living up to my end of the covenant promise. Now what are YOU going to do?" And that's when you pick up the phone to check on someone who's lonely. That's when you make soup or rake leaves for your neighbor. That's when you write an email to your senators about an issue you care about. That's when you make a donation to an organization that's making a difference for good in the world. That's what it means to live out our covenant promise. Small acts of love and justice, one after one, day after day, one world citizen after another. "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire."

I hope that you will take away three messages from this sermon this morning, from this prayer Solomon gave thousands of years ago, three relevant messages for this very moment in which we're living.

1. You don't have to be polite when you talk to God. Worrying about offending God or saying the wrong thing will keep you from expressing yourself honestly. It's ok to express your anger, your fears, your worries, your questions. God can take it.

2. Remember that God is with you, no matter what. Find a few minutes every day to quiet yourself, find a peaceful place to pray - come to the church if you like and sit in our beautiful prayer room.

3. And finally - do something for someone else. That shift in attention away from all that is bad, that participation in God's loving compassion - I guarantee it will lift your spirits and help you think about the future, a future in which the word "COVID-19" no longer dominates, a future in which God's covenant promises are still our solid foundation, our true home.

Let us pray. Holy one, for your word which still has the power to change our lives for the better, we give you thanks and praise. You are our God, we are your people. It is all we need. Amen.