

**“Written on the Heart”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
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I want to go back this morning to a movie that I have touched on various times in my ministry. It was a movie that was presented to me in a seminary class. It was just a scene that was presented. The movie was “Tender Mercies” starring Robert Duvall, a movie from 1983 which, I learned, was turned down by numerous directors at first. It was a movie that did not do too well in the box office but has done well in subsequent years and decades since. It is the story of Mack Sledge, who is a drunkard, a country music star who, in the course of this movie, is trying to find redemption for his life. He’s trying to become sober. He has developed a new relationship, and he has converted to Christianity. The movie itself will bring you to tears, but the scene, for me, that was so powerful was a scene in the front of his pickup truck of him, his new wife and stepson. They had just gotten baptized, and Mack Sledge, played by Robert Duvall, turns to the little boy. The boy, who was about 9 or 10 years old, asked “Do you feel any different?” It was at that spotlight where Robert Duvall looks at him and says “I don’t know”, then they drive off.

That is the question for us in the wake of Christmas. Do we feel any different? What has changed? Other than being deeper in debt, other than having some nice gifts, what has changed for us with the birth of Jesus? It is the question that permeates our scriptural story. Both in the Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament, it is the question of how does Jesus change things for us, what has the birth of Jesus done for us and what did it mean for those first followers of Jesus, and what did it mean to the Gospel writers who wrote this story because it had so impacted their lives.

One of the pieces of language that is used, particularly in the Gospel of Matthew, is that in Jesus’ blood is the new covenant, so when Jesus has what we call the communion meal with His disciples, he talks about the wine as symbolic of the blood of the new covenant which, of course, begs that question of why a new covenant. What was the old covenant?

One of the things that is happening in Christianity, and has been happening for a long time, is that we have, for a variety of reasons, either consciously or unconsciously, tried to make our faith tradition generic. Let’s just make it about God. Let’s just make it about God, “Big G”, God who loves all people. I am not sure that’s wrong, but the effect of making our faith generic really creates a dynamic where we overlook the Hebrew scriptures and the entire concept of covenant. Covenantal idea of faith is central to the Hebrew scriptures. The Old Testament is sort of built upon this idea of God’s covenant with the Israelites.

It is important for us to think about what this covenant means because the first thing to know about covenant is that we are not just talking about some sort of promise or some sort of legal agreement or anything like that, but we are talking about when God initiates this covenant, it is God’s initiative towards the people of Israel. God chooses Israel as God’s people. It is a God initiative. It is most played out, and you can read it in detail, in the Mount Sinai narrative in Exodus 19 through Exodus 24. The Ten Commandments and all of those rules are going to be the covenant for the Israelites.

Covenant, when it is not made into some generic term, has some components to it. The three major components of covenantal faith, at least as the Israelites understood it, was that first God’s covenant with the Israelites had commands and conditions – The Ten Commandments, of course, being sort of the cornerstone, but many, many other commandments and conditions were part of this covenantal relationship between God, known as Yahweh, and the Israelites. The point of those conditions is to say this: Every part of Israel’s life will be under God’s governing. Life will be, in a covenantal relationship, about God’s will and purpose, so covenantal is about first hearing from God, entering into this covenantal relationship because God picks Israel and God has commandments and obligations for this relationship. It is not generic.

In the second part of this covenantal relationship, you know, when we do weddings, I often talk about the covenant of marriage. The covenant of marriage is based on a covenantal relationship between God and the people in the Bible, so we have commands and obligations, and then Israel swears the second part of covenant to fidelity—to be in a relationship of fidelity, of trustworthiness. In Exodus 24:3 and 7 it says “All the words the Lord has spoken we will do and we will be obedient” and then Moses sprinkles blood over all of those people who are gathered there. We will listen to God’s word, we will do as God says, and we will be obedient, and in that ancient type of faith, that sprinkling of blood (which we no longer do, thank goodness), is a seal of the covenant, so their relationship is about saying God, You have picked us and You have treasured us and You have made us your favorites, and You are asking us to live a different way, follow different commandments, to be obedient and trustworthy, and to enter into this relationship of fidelity.

A third component of a covenantal relationship with God is probably, for us modern people, the most distasteful. It is the kind of stuff that really makes us cringe—is this really how God operates. Of course, obedience, in a covenantal relationship, is a life or death matter. There are sanctions for when we violate that covenant. When the commands are violated, life becomes unbearable for the Israelite community, so in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew scriptures, there are a lot of stories of God’s wrath, judgment, anger, and consequences for violating the covenant. A lot of that stuff is ancient. It is from a different age. It is stuff that we would never consider appropriate for today. The point is that, when we are in a relationship, there are sometimes sanctions involved as these ancient Israelites understood it.

Now, in our modern world, one of the troubling factors of a covenantal relationship, at least in the Hebrew scriptures, is that it is an absolute and very particular relationship with one people, so this is God’s choosing one people only. The Israelites are God’s chosen ones. Of course, this is some of the problematic essence of religion in our modern day. When we, whether we are this tradition or that tradition, are the only chosen ones, then we have problems relating to one another because if I have the truth and you don’t, then we can’t go very far in our relationship, so covenantal faith that was so much a part of Israel’s life, is also quite a struggle for us until we get to this concept of Jesus.

Jesus is, and talks about Himself in the gospels as The New Covenant. This is the blood of The New Covenant. All of a sudden this relationship with God has opened up to new people, and the gospel stories are story after story after story about Jesus reaching out to yet another group of people—women, the poor, tax collectors, prostitutes, and so on and so forth, so the covenant is opened up, AND there is an important shift in this relationship because, although the commands, and the obedience, and the sanctions are still there in the relationship, Jesus has shifted this relationship to say that love, mercy and forgiveness are important, perhaps primary in this new relationship with God through Jesus. They stand in tension with one another a little bit.

If we are to think about how things have changed for us in the wake in the birth of Jesus and we think about how that has changed for the followers of Jesus (many, of course, who were originally Jews), what Jesus has done, and what has happened in His birth, and what the church tradition for 2000 years has been is an opening of that door, that God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness, is the primary character of God revealed in Jesus Christ and that all people are now open to this new covenant, and that is what we celebrate in the wake of Christmas. We celebrate that we have been invited into this new covenant through Jesus Christ and that that invitation never ends, and that that door is always being opened more widely because God’s love is for all people.

So, we celebrate this day a new covenant, this new covenant that doesn’t just take the place of an old covenant, but a new covenant that expands this relationship of God because it is God who initiates covenant, God who seeks us, God who wants us to be well and holy and healed and happy. That covenant goes on and takes new shape in the mercy, love, forgiveness and peace of Christ, so today we are changed by The New Covenant in Jesus Christ, and we give thanks for that gift in this Christmas season. Amen.