

“Renew Your Covenant With God”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Joshua 24: 1-5, 14-24

¹ Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

² Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. ³But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. . . . ⁵ “ ‘Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. . . . ¹⁴ “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. . . . We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.” . . .

²²Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

²³ “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

AS most of you know, we have received a grant from the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship. Our goal is to engage college age students from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds in a conversation about worship. Our hope is that out of that conversation we would learn what college age persons find meaningful about worship and that they would perhaps learn why we find what we do meaningful. Additionally, we

hoped to help the students at JU and maybe also at UNF to develop worship for themselves that has some connection to, or some basis in, our understanding of worship. Our third objective was that we might have some new experiences in worship here and that they might lead us in the long term to reflect on how our worship might evolve.

Notice what I did not say. I did not say we are looking to change our

worship. Notice I did not say we are going to suddenly start having rock bands or do away with our order of worship. That isn't the goal of the grant. The goal is to initiate a conversation that will allow us to renew, refresh and reinvigorate our understanding of and experience of worship.

The money for the grant will be used to cover a variety of expenses that we do not have to fund as a church. Some things include the cost for pizza for meetings with students because that is the sacred holy food of college age students. Another expense the grant will provide for is speakers for workshops like the one coming up September 26 with Emily MD Scott. A third part of the budgeted money will cover the costs for a number of us to travel to a monastery in January to experience monastic worship. Our hope is that experience will offer us insight into worship that we would not gain on our own otherwise. So that is a bit about why we are doing this series on "Getting Back to the Heart of Worship."

This series, "Getting Back To The Heart Of Worship," is way to reflect on this and help us think about what we do in worship and why. Last Sunday we talked about the way we worship. I tried to make the point that there is not one, proper, holy way to do worship. God did not ordain the Pilgrim Hymnal as the only source of worship music. Also, God did not say thou shalt wave thy arms over thy head to indicate your praise for me. These are culturally dictated decisions – some people like to move, make noise and otherwise praise God in more boisterous ways, and others like to sit

quietly and maintain a sense of dignity and order. Those are choices based on people's preferences, not on God's commandments about the right way to worship. Instead of bemoaning all the different denominations and different ways of worshiping, why don't we celebrate the variety because that means more people find ways to worship God in ways that are meaningful to them, instead of feeling left out because they cannot relate to a certain "style" of worship?

So that brings me to this Sunday and our topic, "Renewing Your Covenant with God." The Calvin Institute for Christian Worship has a theological paper stating "Ten Convictions about Christian Worship." They are kind of a "Ten Commandments," about what they believe makes worship authentic, Biblical, and Christian. I am going to be using them as the basis of my message the next several weeks. These topics are challenging, because they are theologically focused. I hope to explain each conviction and then try to relate it to our lives and our choices about worship. You can let me know how well I do that.

The first conviction they list is that "worship is an act of covenant renewal." They base this on things like this passage of Scripture that we read today. The passage comes from the life of the people of Israel after they have finally entered into the "Promised Land." They have conquered most of territory and run off most of the inhabitants. Joshua then calls them together and in a moment of true worship he reminds them that it is the God called Yahweh who has delivered them, and they must choose whether to

worship him or the gods of the people around them or some other god. They vow that they will serve Yahweh and not some other god and Joshua warns them that being faithful to God is a difficult thing and they better not make this commitment lightly. They say, no, we choose Yahweh, just as he chose us and Joshua says, okay then, I am a witness to your choice and will hold you to it.

What Joshua is reminding them of is that God had already covenanted with them. God had said, “I shall be your God and you shall be my people. If you worship me and serve me, then I will bless you and deliver you.” They had already made that covenant. A covenant is an agreement between two parties to do certain things and if the parties both fulfill their part of the bargain certain benefits will accrue to each party. The difference between a covenant between a king and a bunch of peasants and between God and his people is that God wants to bless us more than we want to worship and serve him, yet God calls us to this worshipping relationship for our own sake more than God’s.

In other words, we could say that when we worship God it is more for our benefit than God’s. God can live just fine without our worship. God isn’t vain or needy. God invites us to worship because when we worship God it keeps us from the temptation to worship some false god or ourselves. The truth is we do only partially fulfill this covenant. We say we will worship God with our whole heart, mind, and soul – but as I pointed out last week, most of us also

still worship ourselves and other gods on the side, even the best of us.

But here is what the covenant does for us: it calls us into relationship with God and reminds us that the more we recognize and acknowledge “the beauty, majesty, mystery, and holiness of God,” the more we will be able to order our lives properly. We were created to be in relationship with God. When we do not enter into that, our lives are missing an essential ingredient. All those people who do not worship God aren’t hurting God, they are hurting themselves. They are limiting their own blessings. You want to skip worship because it is boring? You want to claim you can worship God just as well on a golf course? You want to say you can’t stand the hypocrites at church? Okay, that’s fine! God ahead and cheat yourself out of the blessing God intends you to receive in worship.

If someone wants to know “what’s in it for me,” if they want to know why worship is important, or how this theological point is relevant to his or her daily life then ask them this: “do you sense that God is blessing your life fully?” I would bet you they will not say yes. If they really believed that then they would be in worship because it is only in worship that we can fully express our thanks to God for all God’s blessings. And I would suggest to you that you can do it best among a community of believers, because together we witness to one another that God’s blessings aren’t exclusive or private. If you think worshipping God alone is sufficient, you are missing the point. God wants you to

be present with others to encourage and support them as they will you.

I would suggest to you that if you feel blessed by God you can't help but want to praise and worship God any chance you get. I could give you a dozen other reasons why worship is essential to Christian life but for me this is the central one. If you claim to love God and you really feel blessed by God's love, you will WANT to praise and worship God. When you have that sense of gratitude then the style or form of worship is almost a ridiculous argument. How do you tell your wife she is a blessing and you love her? Is it wrong to give tulips because roses are the only correct way to tell her?

Now, the reason worship is an act of renewing the covenant is that every time we enter into worship we express our desire to be in relationship with God. When we come and express our love, praise, gratitude and appreciation for God it forms our heart. It shapes us in ways that make us more ready to receive the blessings God wants to give us. It makes us more aware. It helps us in difficult times to trust that God STILL wants to bless us even if we are having difficulty.

Are the economic problems hurting you? You need to be in worship so that you can be better prepared to weather the problem and know God, in the words of Jeremiah 29:11 has promised: "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Are you struggling with grief and sorrow and not feeling like praising and thanking God? That's okay, you still

need to be in worship, because it is one who worshiped God who said, "even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." If someone has other excuses, like, oh worship is boring, then I challenge them to ask themselves if they are "serving the Lord with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength." If they are questions of boredom are absurd.

Well, as you can tell, I am passionate about worship. It is the central thing in my life. And I would tell you not because I am a preacher, I would tell you I am a preacher because long before I was a preacher worship became the central thing in my life. I love to worship. I don't really care if it is an orderly, dignified but welcoming service like ours or a full-tilt gospel-singing, preacher-whooping African-American revival, I love to worship. It orders my life around the one God who deserves my worship and helps me not give in to all the other gods that tempt me and test me.

I haven't even had time to talk about how authentic worship includes the joyful and solemn celebration of the sacraments of Holy Communion and Christian Baptism, or extends to include warm, Christ-centered hospitality to all people as an expression of that covenant. I'll get to them, though, I promise. In the meantime, I thank God for these moments together with God and with you to renew our covenant with God.
AMEN.