

## The Promise-Making, Promise-Breaking, Promise-Renewing Animal

Readings: 'For What Binds Us' by Jane Hirshfield  
'A Ritual to Read to Each Other' by William Stafford  
'Beyond the Zero Sum Game' by Nathan C. Walker

You all ask good questions. A few months ago, I asked you all to submit questions for me to answer during the service. Your questions led me to re-word my pastoral prayer so it is more sensitive to people who have experienced trauma. Your questions led me to develop a new adult religious education class about the habits of the heart necessary to sustain democracy – check the newsletter for details on that. Your questions have prompted me to think in new ways about my faith and practice and how we do church together. One of your questions inspired this sermon. Your questions are challenging and inspiring – and please feel free to share them with me any time – don't wait for that particular question sermon to come around again.

The question that inspired me today is this one, "I have noticed that when groups meet for particular purposes, like [religious education] or [Our Whole Lives classes], they often begin by creating a "covenant." Are there more comprehensive, enduring covenants? Covenants specific to this congregation? Overarching covenants followed by all UU congregations? Who creates them and how are they enforced?"

Creating a covenant is a common practice among modern Unitarian Universalists. We often do it without really considering the tradition we're continuing as we do it. How did we get here? To answer this question, we're going to time-travel. Unfortunately, I don't have a Doc Brown's DeLorean or H.G. Wells' Time Machine or the time machine built by SpongeBob and Plankton in the movie *SpongeBob: Sponge out of Water* waiting for us out in the parking lot. We'll just imagine. It's probably safer that way, anyway. We all know how that time-traveling stories are ripe with danger and the possibility of erasing oneself from existence.

The first stop in our journey through history is in the near east, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era. It is hot and dry and dusty and the people around us have just been conquered. Even though we are nearly 3,000 years in the past, some of the names will sound familiar. In our imaginings, we will be in the small kingdom of Israel. This ancient kingdom of Israel has different geography, governance, and religion than modern Israel known today. Beginning in the year 745 before the common era, this ancient kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. Again, Assyria sounds a lot like modern Syria, a state whose civil war fills our headlines and breaks our hearts, but it is not the same. A lot changes in 2,800 years. The Assyrian Empire was a superpower of the ancient near east, with a capitol in Ninevah, in what is now northern Iraq.

When the Assyrian Empire conquered the kingdom of Israel, they did what conquering powers usually did in those days. They imposed a covenant—a series of promises in the form of a vassal treaty—on the people they defeated in battle. The Israelites promised to pay tributes and be loyal to the Assyrian king. The covenant also included curses that the Israelites would impose on themselves if they failed to uphold the covenant. Scholars tell us that when these sorts of covenants were made, the recently-defeated leaders who agreed to them cut apart a living animal and stood among the pieces of bleeding flesh proclaiming, "this is what should happen to us if we break our covenant."<sup>1</sup> They were promise-making animals. And for the sake of their physical safety, they were not often promise-breaking animals.

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<sup>1</sup> Carr, David M. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible*.

Now, an Empire's defeat of a minor kingdom thousands of years ago is a story worth telling today only because of what happened next. A prophet in the Israelite kingdom proclaimed that the Israelites' covenant is not with the Assyrian Empire, but with their God, Yahweh. This innovation in religion is attributed to a prophet named Hosea, and is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. This was a radical adaptation and transformation. This ancient prophet took the tools of the oppressor and used them in a new way, used them to tell a story about a chosen people and a God on the side of the oppressed. This radical new idea of covenant transformed a secular treaty into a supernatural promise and reminded the people of Israel that their God, not the Assyrian Empire was the ultimate authority. Instead of the Assyrian emperor demanding his subject's highest allegiance, Yahweh demanded that his followers 'have no other Gods before me.' Instead of the Assyrian Empire punishing disloyalty, Yahweh would curse those who were unfaithful. The people of ancient Israel were promise-making animals.

This idea of covenant with Yahweh spread widely in ancient Israel and nearby regions. This new idea of religious covenant shaped the writings and stories that became the Hebrew Bible, much of which had not been formalized at the time of the Assyrian military victory. This idea of divine covenant is found throughout the Hebrew Bible. Jewish theologian Martin Buber calls humanity a promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing animal.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew Bible is a testament to that. It is, in large part, stories of promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise-renewing. The God of the Hebrew Bible covenants with Noah after the flood, promising not to destroy the world again and naming the rainbow a symbol of that promise. That God covenants with Abraham to make the Israelites a chosen people and with Moses at Sinai. Large portions of the book of Deuteronomy are a near word for word adaptation of an Assyrian covenant with a conquered people, but with Yahweh playing the role of Assyria.<sup>3</sup> Covenant as a religious idea has been with us ever since.

So covenant becomes a religious idea 2,800 years ago in what was an ancient near eastern backwater. How do we get from there to a classroom of Unitarian Universalists creating a covenant together? It's time for the next stop in our journey through time.

Let's step back into Mr. Peabody and Sherman's WABAC Machine or the TARDIS from *Dr. Who* or Arthur Dent's time-traveling chesterfield sofa from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series to travel across centuries and across continents. We see the years go by in a blur. We see the formation of Christianity in fast-forward. Many of the earliest followers of Jesus believed that Jesus and his ministry created a new covenant, largely canceling the covenants of the Hebrew Bible. The ancient idea of covenant was adapted and transformed again to suit a new context.

We step out of our time machine in 1637 of the common era in what would become Dedham, Massachusetts. We are no longer among ancient Israelites, but English Puritans. These Puritans have recently arrived in New England after sailing across the Atlantic Ocean. They are the 30 or so English families that founded Dedham, a community about 12 miles southwest of Boston, on land taken from Native Americans. They built houses and planted fields. Then, once they've settled in a bit, they decide they should have a church in their town. The families were strangers to one another, all from different parts of England, and didn't know what kind of church they wanted to be together. What would we do in

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Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. page 112

<sup>2</sup> Buehrens, John A. and Rebecca Ann Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010. page 49

<sup>3</sup> Carr, 141

this situation? Probably something similar to what actually happened. The Dedham Puritans formed a discussion group. Every Thursday night, they met in someone's home to talk about the most important issues in their community and how they wanted their new church to respond to them. They had these weekly discussions for nearly a year. They spoke of how their new town could be a place of justice and peace... and then, months after their discussions began, they touched on their beliefs about God and the Bible. They realized that unity of belief wasn't as important as their commitments to each other, their shared hopes of how they might be together. When they founded their church, they formalized their commitments in a written covenant.<sup>4</sup> Those who joined the new town church in Dedham would promise to (and bear with me through the archaic language).

'through ye help ye lord... live together in this our holy fellowship according to ye rule of love in all holy watchfulness over each other and faithful mutual helpfulness in ye ways of god for ye spiritual and temporal comfort and good of one another.'<sup>5</sup>

Did you catch how different this is from the ancient covenants? First, there are no curses in it. We know that the Puritans sometimes expelled people who did not abide by community norms or who voiced dissenting beliefs, but that wasn't written into the Dedham church's covenant. Another significant difference is that the promise of this covenant aren't between a people and their God, but among the people themselves. They describe their hopes and dreams for their community and promise to live into them as much as they can. True, as good Puritans, they wanted The Holy's help to live according to the ways of God – but they did not make their promises to God, but to each other. They were promise-making animals.

They promised to live together according to the rule of love. They promised faithful mutual helpfulness. They promised holy fellowship. That's not so different from this congregation's covenant, which we call our Bond of Union. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

Sure, our beliefs and Puritan beliefs are very different. The Puritans were not known for their religious tolerance. They would likely be horrified by the diversity of belief and nonbelief in our congregation. Even so, our congregational covenant and the Dedham congregation's covenant echo one another. There's a reason for that. The reason is, that the church that was founded with this covenant in Dedham, is—after a fascinating history which would require its own time-traveling journey to tell in its fullness— now known as First Church and Parish in Dedham, Unitarian Universalist. The 30 families that founded the church in Dedham centuries ago surely had no idea that their little town church would now be a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Those Puritans would be pretty surprised with what we've done with their church, though our covenants would sound familiar. In the Dedham covenant and in the covenants of a number of other early New England congregations—we see the roots of who we are with one another today, we see the roots of our highest hopes for our community.

Now let's climb back into our Klingon Bird of Prey to slingshot around the sun or step into Bill and Ted's excellent phone booth or look into Dumbledore's pensieve to continue our journey through space and time. Next stop: Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1892. We're no longer gathering with Puritans, but Unitarians. Members and friends of the newly re-named People's Church of Kalamazoo. We gather downtown with

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<sup>4</sup> Wesley, Alice Blair. 'The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant.' Pages 12-14. <http://minnslectures.org/archive/wesley/Lecture1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Carden, Allen. 'The Communal Ideal in Puritan New England 1630-1700.' *Fides et historia*, 17 no 1 Fall-Wint 1984, page 32

our forebearers in the newly constructed building at the corner of Lovell and Park streets, a building that some of us here today remember – it was this church's meeting place until 45 years ago.

Then, People's Church's minister was a young woman named Caroline Bartlett. It was new and notable for women to be in ministry then – and most of the first Unitarian women ministers served in the Midwest, the more radical parts of the Unitarian fold then. It wasn't just the affirmation of women in ministry that made them radical. They questioned whether everyone in a church had to believe the same thing to be a congregation together. We know the answer to that – we know that a strong community could be created based on shared values and shared commitments, not shared belief, but this was up for debate 130 years ago. Those advocating this new way in religion called themselves the Western Unitarian Conference and were led by Jenkin Lloyd Jones. Jones was a mentor to Bartlett and preached her installation here – some of you remember that last spring Megan Lloyd Joiner, a Unitarian Universalist minister, a dear friend of mine, and a relative of Jones preached my installation here – I invited her because of this historical connection.

Those radical Western Unitarians who didn't think shared beliefs had to be the basis for religious community adopted Bonds of Union in their congregations through the 1890s. People's Church adopted ours in 1892. It the promise someone makes when they join our church, which has stayed the same for the past 125 years with only an update for more inclusive language:

Earnestly desiring to develop in ourselves and in the world honest, reverent thought, faithfulness to our highest conception of right living, the spirit of love and service to all people, and allegiance towards all the interests of morality and religion, as interpreted by the growing thought and purest lives of humanity:

We join ourselves together hoping to help one another in all good things and advance the cause of pure and practical religion in the community. We base our union upon no creed test but upon the purpose herein expressed and welcome all who wish to join us to help establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world.

One of the interesting things I learned in my study this week is that a lot of the Bonds of Union among these Western Unitarian Conference churches echo one another. The Bond of Union of First UU Church of Omaha speaks of right living and pure religion.<sup>6</sup> The UU Congregation of Erie, PA includes *'the cause of truth, righteousness and love in the world.'*<sup>7</sup> Everyone was cribbing from one another, borrowing the especially good lines.

And our Bond of Union, that is our covenant, is again an adaptation and transformation. It's different from the Dedham congregation's covenant in important ways. God doesn't make an appearance. As our tradition journeyed across the centuries the words we use for the most ultimate and the most intimate have changed, but the focus on love and community remains. Our covenants remain the promises we make to one another, our promises to support one another and work together.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Membership.' *First Unitarian Universalist Church of Omaha*. Retrieved from <http://www.firstuuumaha.org/membership>

<sup>7</sup> 'Our Bond of Union.' Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Erie. Retrieved from <http://uuerie.org/about-us/bond-of-union/>

First, a covenant was the promises between a conquering empire and a defeated kingdom. Then, a covenant was the promise between a people and their God. Next, covenants became a promise between people with calls for God's assistance to help them live into those promises. And now, for us, covenants are the promises between people connected by their shared commitment to their religious community but not by shared belief. We know that the adaptation and transformation of covenants is not over. Ours is a living tradition that adapts and transforms in response to an ever-changing world.

So let's splash into the Hot Tub Time Machine or use Hermione Granger's Time-Turner to get back to the present day. Welcome home. We've been on quite a journey across space and across time. I know our journey didn't take us to all of the answers to the wonderful question that launched this sermon... and I promise to address the questions that remain unanswered later.

As we settled back in to our present, may we look back to remember the roots of our traditions that stretch back farther than we can imagine.

May we look forward to the good days in store for this congregation and the continued adaption and transformation in store for us all.

And may we look around and know that this congregation is bound together by shared promises.

We join ourselves together hoping to help one another in all good things and advance the cause of pure and practical religion in the community. We base our union upon no creed test but upon the purpose herein expressed and welcome all who wish to join us to help establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.