Living in Covenant
Joshua 24, selected verses
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
November 8, 2026
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

I was recently in my car listening to *Science Friday* on public radio. There was an interview with actor and director Isabella Rossellini and ecologist and writer Dr. Carl Safina. They were talking to Flora Lichtman about what animals think and feel. The entire conversation was interesting as they challenged some long held beliefs about the limitations of animals, but it was something Carl Safina said at the end of the interview that caught my attention for a different reason.

They were discussing long standing rules in science that some people cling to, but that they believe need to be challenged because they are too limiting. And Dr. Safina said this, "that's a really unscientific thing, to have a rule about what you may not see. And simply allowing yourself to say, I see this, I think it's what this means, that is much more in the actual spirit of science." [He went on saying, "The limitations are] almost more of a religious type feeling that you may *not* do this. And science is supposed to be more of a permissive thing. What is this? What does it mean?" (Isabella Rossellini on how acting connects to animal cognition).

As someone who has rooted myself in the religious, I couldn't help but wonder about his concept of religion. And I couldn't help but be reminded that all too often, religion is seen as just that - a set of rules, a list of regulations most of which start with "thou shall not", or a group of things you are told you have to believe.

And yet, I would challenge that concept. In fact, not only do I understand religion to be about questions more than answers, about a journey of growing more than a lifetime of certain belief, but I am reminded time and time again that religion is about relationship.

We hear that throughout scripture. And we hear that in today's reading. That is what the Biblical idea of covenant is about.

From the creation stories in Genesis, stories of God and people interacting and working together and co-creating…to stories throughout the Torah, stories of the Hebrew people coming to understand themselves as a unique community shaped by their relationship with one specific god. From the words of the prophets who kept reminding the people that their covenant with Yahweh wasn't about repeating rituals or claiming beliefs but about how they lived in relationship with their neighbor…to the life of Jesus who challenged again and again the religious leaders who allowed the letter of the law to become more important than the people impacted by it.

And today, in our reading from the book of Joshua, here as Joshua, their leader, is nearing the end of his life, he challenges the people to be aware of what it means to live in covenant with Yahweh.

All contents copyright of the author.

And part of that reminder is that this covenant is about a living relationship, and it is not easy.

See, even though sometimes rules and regulations and expectations seem difficult to keep, the reality is that at some level it is easier to claim a faith based on “thou shalt not.” It is easier to claim a faith rooted in a clear list of beliefs that you are required to confirm. And I’m not saying that following all the rules or actually believing all the things on any one church or religion’s list of beliefs is easy. But, when religion comes down to a black and white list of beliefs or actions, then measuring one’s success, or even one’s failure, becomes easier.

If my faith tells me that I need to repeat the chosen creed with conviction, give 10% of my income to the church, and follow a narrow set of behavioral guidelines within my romantic relationships, then I have a list. I can see it, I can check off the ones I do, I can feel guilty about the ones I skip.

But, here in the book of Joshua, the reminder that is being given is that living in covenant with Yahweh isn’t just about checking beliefs or actions off the to-do list. Rather it is about a dynamic, growing, changing relationship with God that is meant to impact every moment of their lives, and meant to shape the core of who they are.

And that means that covenant isn’t about a choice made at one moment in time, but about ongoing choices about how to live each day.

There’s also a little something interesting that most of us miss about where this conversation in the book of Joshua is happening. We are told that he gathered the people at Shechem. Okay. Most of us just hear that as a location and don’t think more about it.

But Shechem is significant in several ways.

Shechem was the place where Yahweh promised Abram the land, in fact the first place Abram built an altar to Yahweh. So this place carries with it the history of this covenant relationship.

Shechem was also the place where a couple generations after that, Jacob took all the other gods from the people and hid them beneath the oak at Shechem. In other words, the place in which they stood was a reminder of the divided loyalties of their past. That very place was a reminder of how difficult it could be to be faithful to Yahweh especially in the shadow of other choices.

And in their day Shechem wasn’t just a city, but it was a city of refuge, a place that protected people from unjust accusations and punishment.

All contents copyright of the author.

So, when Joshua invites the people to choose whom they will serve, he is inviting them not to give an easy answer or go along with the crowd or do what the religious leaders expect. Rather he is inviting them into a relationship that carries with it great responsibility.

Joshua doesn't invite the people to know things about God, but to know God and let God know and change them.

Joshua doesn't invite the people into a religion of rules, but to a religion of relationship with God and with their neighbors.

Joshua doesn't invite the people into a one time commitment, but to a way of life where minute by minute and hour by hour, in all that they do, they ask questions about how their actions are serving God.

So, what does that mean for us?

It means that we, too, are called into a living relationship with God. And it means that we are to open ourselves to be shaped by God's heart.

But what does that look like? Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt at *Dancing With the Word* proposes this: "I am called to wonder every day as I begin a new day:

- Will I choose to live in kindness or will I let old hurts taint my responses to those around me?
- Will I close my office door or will I respond to the cry of pain in the outer office? Or on the other end of the phone line? Or in our neighborhood and beyond?
- Will I work for justice in the world or will I cower in my fear that I might offend?
- Will I entrust to God a portion of what I have been given or will I hoard it all away in fear?
- Will I begin and end my day in prayer or will I try to go it alone?" Dancing with the Word: Do I Choose or Am I Chosen?

Friends, we are invited to live in covenant with the God who loves us. And in that covenant we are invited to share God's love with the world. May it be so.

All contents copyright of the author.