

Jan 3, 2021 – Covenant/Confirmation – circuit online

Great is thy faithfulness – StF 51

Breath of Heaven -- <https://youtu.be/KShSB1R1KMM>

Come, let us use the Grace Divine – MW 287

O Thou Who Camest – StF 564

Deuteronomy 29: 10-15

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Romans 12:1-2

==ORDER OF SERVICE ==

Call to worship

Great is thy faithfulness – StF 51

Prayer – Methodist Worship Book, 282ff

Deuteronomy 29: 10-15

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Meditation – Rev Pickard

Covenant Intro and Confessions – MW 285-6

Romans 12:1-2

Breath of Heaven -- <https://youtu.be/KShSB1R1KMM>

Confirmation of Amy Evans – MW 97

Testimony

Come, let us use the Grace Divine – MW 287

Covenant Prayer – MW 287-9

Intercessions – MW 290-1

O Thou Who Camest – StF 564

Benediction

Deuteronomy 29: 10-15

You stand assembled today, all of you, before the LORD your God—the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water—to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, sworn by an oath, which the LORD your God is making with you today; in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today.

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, By the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Each year we celebrate Covenant Sunday at the beginning of the year –
It's a bit like a New Year's celebration
An annual reminder, a kind of annual taking-stock
of where we are now and where God needs us to be.
At the beginning of this particular year
We're even more eager than usual to hope
this new year will be better than the past one!

In a time of unease and disruption,
A time when we feel we've been separated from loved ones for so long,
It's good to have our rituals, our ways of reconnecting with each other
Even if we can't do this in person.
Our rituals, such as Covenant Service, with familiar words and patterns
Remind us that there is a certain order to the world
Remind us that God is still our God
That we are still God's people,
Encouraged and entrusted to do what is Good and Right and True.

The fact that we're sharing in this Covenant Service from our own homes
Might bring it new meaning this year,
As the separations of what we do at home or work or worship are all erased.
For many of us, a single location is where all our life takes place.
We can no longer leave 'church things', like Covenant promises,
In a particular building on Sunday
But Covenant promises become part of our everyday life.

In the Jeremiah reading, God's promises are to be 'written on our hearts'
The Jewish people had the promises painted above the doors of their houses
To remind them of God's presence in their everyday lives:
That daily, ordinary lives are to be sacred;
The homes where we eat and sleep and wash and work
And play and read and watch tv and phone friends and send emails
Are to be the places where we encounter God at work with us
The places where God has work for each of us to do on behalf of God's kingdom.

Each year I'm drawn to the Deuteronomy text,
Particularly the part about God calling us to be in community
With "the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials,
all the men of Israel, your children, and your women..."
In the year we've just finished, when we haven't been able to 'stand together' with each other
Physically and in person,
We've learned other ways of being community:
Many of us have been particularly aware of the need to reach out
to those of our congregations who are particularly isolated during the pandemic,
and that has been important – for some it has even been life-saving,
recognising and meeting needs that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.
We have learned to phone each other more regularly
Even as we've learned to zoom and chat to faces on screens.
We've recognised again that 'community' doesn't just happen by accident.
It takes intent; it takes effort.

The Deuteronomy text also goes on to widen that understanding of community
To include ‘the aliens who are in your camp,
both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water’.
I’ve often thought about how that has meant the people who perform services for us
That enable our daily lives to continue smoothly
Often with little awareness on our part that they are there...
At the beginning of the first Lockdown,
We were coming out on Thursdays to clap for the NHS staff,
And, in the process, some of us began to meet our neighbours...
But the Covenant readings today challenge us to think about
How we must continue to value the others who work on behalf of us all,
Often with very little thanks or even recognition.
Delivery drivers, staff who work at home or behind the scenes to keep things going.
Those who have continued to show up for work when most of us have stayed at home.
Teachers who are never sure whether they’ll be teaching in person or online...

There has also been the question of how we might ‘reach out’ to our communities
When our buildings are shut.
Certainly our buildings are important for ‘us’,
And, to some extent, for what they mean to our communities
But perhaps the pandemic has made us more aware that we can’t just rely
On our bricks and mortar to be ‘the Christian presence’.
The Jeremiah reading reminds us that God’s covenant
needs to be ‘written on our hearts.’
The Romans reading, which we’ll hear later,
Speaks of offering up our physical bodies as a ‘living sacrifice.’
Indeed, in times when these scriptures were written,
The emphasis was not on gathered worship in a building
As much as it was on how we each lived our lives wherever we were.

Over the past 9-10 months, I’ve had several calls through phone or email
with folks who were previously connected with the church
but haven’t darkened its doors for years or decades.
They’ve called because some how they still wanted to be in touch,
For some, because the pandemic has made them realise
they needed to reconnect with a worshipping/fellowshipping community –
In some cases the pandemic had removed the previous excuse of
‘going to church right now just isn’t convenient’
They have perhaps felt God moving in their lives
And they wanted to be part of that community again.
I wonder if we who are ‘in the community’ have felt the same urge to reconnect?
If not, why?
If so, what have we done about it?
Might this year’s Covenant remind us of our responsibility to reach out?

Our Methodist Connexion is encouraging us to personally consider
What’s now known as the ‘Methodist Way of Life’ –
A simple set of questions that we are to engage with on a regular basis:
Questions about how Worship: when and how we have recently felt close to –
Or far away from – God...

Questions about Learning and Caring: how we've practiced generosity,
Or how we're taking care of ourself in difficult times...
Questions about Service: caring for creation, addressing injustice,
using our financial resources wisely
Questions about Evangelism: how we find opportunities – even in lockdown! –
To share our faith with others....
In all these areas, many have noted that God has been at work during this pandemic—
And often in ways that perhaps we were too busy previously to notice...

Often, it's in our times of gathering together – in whatever ways we can,
That we can remind each other of how God is at work.
The Methodist Way of Life indeed encourages us to regularly meet with others
To support each other, to hold each other accountable...
During the past year, many such groups have popped up around the circuit –
Prayer groups, study groups, discussion groups – online or phone or post.
If you haven't found or joined one of these yet,
ask your minister for suggestions of what might work for you.

In closing this meditation today, I want to share a 'pandemic blessing'
That's come to Union Street in the shape of a person
Who took it upon herself to reach out –
She was new to Maidstone, having moved in to a flat near Union Street for work
at the beginning of the first lockdown... not knowing anyone in the town!
As she passed by the church on her way to her new job,
She noted it was a Methodist church,
And she took it upon herself to find a way to be in touch.
Amy has since been a regular attender at our online services
And the After-Church Chats,
and has even gone through a Membership Class on zoom.
Amy and I have never met in person, but she will be confirmed as a Methodist
Later in this morning's service.
If you had told me this story a year ago, I might not have believed you,
But God is bigger than our understandings of how things must be
And braver than our comfortable habits
And ever willing to lead us on to new and daring ways
To be a people in Covenant with Godself, with our congregations,
With all those in our communities.

As we each separately and all together – as a circuit! – join in the Covenant today,
We each must consider again: To what is God calling each of us?
What God-given talents and gifts are we to use for God's work?
What new ways of working and being and connecting are we to use?
What new things is God doing in our midst?
How best might we share that with others?

As we've seen time and again: Our God is not limited by a pandemic:
Our God is alive and well and working in our midst:
Our God has work for us to do as well.
Working together, Good will continue to triumph over Evil.
The Covenant, and our part in it, is as essential as ever.