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This morning, I want to talk about covenants. Covenants are a recurring theme in our scriptures, and in Second Samuel this morning, we hear that David is concerned about the ark of the covenant living in a tent when he himself is living in a grand house.

But what is an ark anyway someone asked me last week. And why would a covenant need one?

An ark simply refers to something which affords safety and protection. We've all heard of Noah's ark—that huge boat he built to protect his family and the animals from the flood that wiped out the rest of the world.

The Ark of the Covenant is the box built to protect the two stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. These were precious tablets that meant everything to Israel and needed to be protected at all costs.

In the 25th chapter of Exodus, God asks the people to build an ark, sometimes called a tabernacle, for these stone tablets, saying, "Build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among you." (Exodus 25:8) The ark was like a traveling Temple in the days before the great Temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem. Because the ark was mobile, it was possible for the Israelites to carry God around with them, wherever they went, even into battle.

But it's important to understand that the ark didn't really hold God—that would have been idolatrous. Richard Rohr calls the Ark of the Covenant the "place-holder" for God." The open space above the ark had two golden cherubim facing each other, with their wings stretched toward one another, creating a seat between them, called the "Throne of Mercy." And in that space between their wings, God promised to meet the people of Israel. (Exodus 25:22). It was God who gave the instructions to build the throne of mercy so that there would be a space where God and humanity could be in relationship. (<https://cac.org/the-ark-of-the-covenant-2016-06-27/>) This way of understanding God was unlike any other culture and nation in the Ancient Near East. This was a personal and intimate God.

This was a God who made covenants with the people that were not just transactional, but relational. The Ten Commandments were the covenant that outlined how the people of Israel were to live in harmony with one another and how they were to be God's people.

Covenants are a thread that run all through our scriptures. The very first covenant we find in the Bible is the Noahic one, when God promised to never again destroy all the

people of the earth with a flood and sent a rainbow as the sign of that promise. The Abrahamic covenant was made when God called Abraham to leave the land of his fathers and to go to a new land where God would make a great nation of him, blessing him and calling him to be a blessing to others. We find yet another covenant in our reading today. The Davidic covenant is made when God promises to David that a kingdom will be established from his line and that God desires to be as a parent to this succession of kings called, not just to rule Israel, but to care for Israel as a shepherd cares for his sheep. And because God promises in this covenant to establish the throne of David's kingdom forever, at the time of Jesus, the people of Israel are still waiting for a king from David's line to retake the throne. And many of them believe that Jesus is that king. Even Rome is threatened by this promise that Israel still believes in and awaits its fulfillment.

The people of Israel know that God's plans are sometimes hidden from them, but they trust in the faithfulness of God and the covenants that God has made with them. And while Israel will often fall short of what God asks of them, God can be trusted to remain faithful. In the book of Exodus, we get this description of God who has led them out of their bondage in Egypt onto the path of liberation.

YHWH, YHWH, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and abounding in faithfulness. For the thousandth generation, YHWH maintains his kindness, forgiving all our faults, transgressions, and sins. (Exodus 34:6-7)

It cannot be overstated how incredible these words are and how different Israel's understanding of Yahweh was from their neighbors' understanding of their gods. With these words, the people are proclaiming that they experience a god who is merciful, compassionate, gracious, steadfast in love, faithful, and forgiving. This is the heart of their entire belief system.

It remains the heart of our belief system as well. This is the foundation of our concept of grace, and it all the more miraculous and powerful because God promises to be all of those things knowing full well how unfaithful we will be as God's people.

In the Bible, particularly in the books of the Prophets, we are constantly reminded of all the ways that Israel has fallen short—they have worshiped other gods, they have not cared for the poor, they have made idols for themselves, and other transgressions. And yet God's faithfulness is never dependent on their worthiness or readiness. God prefers restorative justice to punitive justice because restoring us to right and loving relationship is a divine justice—the only kind worthy of God.

This steadfast love of God is sometimes called covenant love, and we find it throughout the Bible in the promises God continues to make despite the unfaithfulness of Israel.

These covenants are the foundation of Israel's understanding of who they are, and covenant is at the heart of who we are as Christians, too. We also live in a covenantal relationship with God. At our baptism, we agree to a covenant where we promise to be

faithful and to do God's work in the world. And in then we are reborn by the Holy Spirit and baptized into the risen life of Christ as the sign of that covenant.

At the Eucharist, we celebrate a new covenant—we tell the story of our salvation and our union with Christ. And we invite all, no matter their worthiness, to come to the table and partake in the body of God.

It is covenant that defines our relationship with God, and if we believe that God holds us in the promise of steadfast love, a love that shines through in Jesus when he heals and feeds and shepherds the people, how might we be called to respond to that promise? With thanksgiving, to be sure, which is why worship is so important to our relationship with God. But I think we are also called to respond with a spirit of imitation. *We are called* to enter into a covenantal relationship with the world around us. If we could give to the world a fraction of the tenderness and compassion, kindness and forgiveness that we receive from God through Christ, think how we could begin to heal the world. May it be so. Amen.