

The Old Covenant prescribed animal sacrifices as part of the *Yom Kippur* observance: this “life-for-a-life” principle is the foundation of the old sacrificial system. But that system was incomplete: the animal killed could not fully offset the sins of the human offender because the life sacrificed was not equal to the life spared. Thus the priests under the Old Covenant could not truly make the people right with God. There needed to be a change: a new system, a new sacrifice, and a new covenant.

That change came with Jesus. Using *Yom Kippur* imagery, Jesus served as both our high priest and our sacrifice. Jesus was fully human – just like us – making the “his life-for-our-life” exchange equal, but at the same time Jesus was fully divine making the sacrifice complete, once and for all. He offered himself as the perfect sacrifice on our behalf, and he continues to serve as our high priest interceding on our behalf before God (Heb. 7:23-28).

This kind of sacrificial love is the basis of the New Covenant that God promised us. God, who loves us with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:1), comes to us in Jesus Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: God comes in Christ to make us whole and right with God. As children of God, we may draw near to God, and develop close, meaningful relationships with God. We no longer need special prayers of feast days or sacrifices; all that God requires is faith. We can go directly to God through Christ, not by our own actions, but because of what Christ did for us. *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance - now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant* (Heb. 9:15).

The apostle Paul echoes this sentiment in his famous words to the Romans: *for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ* (Rom. 6:23). Judged on our own merits we would all fall short, but under this New Covenant we are justified before God based solely on what Christ has done for us. The New Covenant is the gospel of Jesus Christ: it is the message of salvation by grace through faith in him. And this is God’s gift to God’s people, not something we could ever earn. We are given preferential status because Christ died so that we might live. Access to God’s gift of grace makes this New Covenant a “better” covenant than the covenant under the law, because it was established on better promises (Heb. 8:6).

Yet this New Covenant does not abolish the old covenants. Each of the previous covenants pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of each promise. With Noah, God sought to redeem and renew the world; in Jesus Christ, creation is redeemed forever and set on the path to final renewal. With Abraham, God promised a nation, a land, and a blessing; in Jesus Christ all the peoples of the world are gathered together into God’s Kingdom, and each is blessed to be a blessing to others. With Moses, God gave the law to bind God’s people together and give them a new identity; in Jesus Christ we are bound unequivocally and eternally as God’s own children. With David, God assured an everlasting kingdom; in Jesus Christ, God’s Kingdom is come near, and the One who died and rose again is set upon the throne to rule forevermore.

As with all the previous covenants, once again God promises to be our God if we will be God’s people. God claims us and calls us to be the Church, serving as Christ’s disciples under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit. The New Covenant that binds us to God also binds us to each other. Therefore our commitment to each other in a local church is a covenant commitment. God’s covenant with us creates and shapes our covenant with each other. We are a church because we come together and with common commitments: we pledge to be the church for each other and for the world and for the glory of God.

The prophet Ezekiel announced God’s intention to give God’s people – the Church – a new heart, a new spirit, and a new life with the ability to follow God’s ways (Ezek. 36:26-27). As God’s covenant people we know we are saved by grace through faith: God fills our hearts with love for one another, God grants us the Holy Spirit to guide and inspire us, and God offers us the chance to live into the Kingdom, right here and right now, as children of God.

Today we claim that New Covenant heritage, we renew that covenant with God and each other, and we extend that covenant of grace to the Fergus Falls community. Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Arms is how our congregation defines how we seek to live out this New Covenant and to partner with God in the revitalizing of our community. As God’s covenant people, we have the opportunity to partner with God in restoring creation, in living according to God’s Kingdom standards of peace and justice, and through our blessings to be a blessing to others.

I know you are already actively involved in many areas within our community. I know you serve on charitable boards and in service clubs. I know you mentor students and coach sports teams. I know you volunteer with half-a-dozen hunger ministries. I know you support mission experiences and give to our financial assistance funds. And all of that is great: please continue to do those things. But I want you to reconsider that work: it should not be done as an obligation to God, but as the joyous outpouring of a grace-filled life. We are richly blessed, and with great blessing comes great responsibility.

Today is Dedication Sunday. This is the day we renew our commitment to be God's covenant people at The Federated Church. This is the day we arouse your enthusiasm for the work to which God calls us. This is the day we vow to persevere in God's Kingdom work whatever the cost. This is the day we pledge our allegiance to the God who loves us with an everlasting love. This is the day we devote ourselves to the people of our communities with all the love and grace and compassion God shows to us.

This is our Day of Atonement, too. Today we call upon God to forgive our past mistakes and our present failings; and we covenant to partner with God in all that God is doing in our neighborhoods. Yesterday is gone, today is fleeing, but God's tomorrow shines bright with opportunity.

Prayer: God, I give you my tomorrow.....beginning today. Yesterday is gone: the mistakes and the victories are out of my control. Forgive me for those things I did wrong. I thank you for the strength to do those things I did right. But tomorrow is yours. All of my hopes and dreams- I surrender them to you. All of my plans- I lay them before you and ask you to guide and direct me. To open the doors you want opened in my life and to shut those I should not walk through. Use me as your vessel to make a difference in the lives of those you have put within my realm of influence. I give myself to you. In the name of Jesus. Amen

## The New Covenant in Jesus

**Sunday, October 23, 2016**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Hebrews 9:11-15**

In 1965, Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Sandy Koufax was at the top of his game. Nicknamed "the Man with the Golden Arm," Koufax helped propel his team to the World Series. The Dodgers would face the Minnesota Twins in the opening game, scheduled to be played at Metropolitan Stadium in the Twin Cities, on October 6<sup>th</sup> – a date that happened to be the Jewish festival of *Yom Kippur*. In Hebrew, *Yom Kippur* means "Day of Atonement," a day dedicated to fasting, prayer and the repentance for sins.

Although he didn't consider himself particularly religious, Koufax didn't have to think twice. "There was never any decision to make," Koufax later recalled, "because there was never any possibility that I would pitch. *Yom Kippur* is the holiest day of the Jewish religion. The club knows I don't work that day." Koufax sat out the game. The Dodgers lost that game, but with Koufax's help they won the World Series, taking the 1965 Pennant. Major League Baseball named Koufax the Most Valuable Player of the season and inducted him into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972.<sup>1</sup> Koufax is remembered both as a great pitcher and as a man of faith.

The atonement for sins was part of the covenant God made with Israelites at Mount Sinai. On *Yom Kippur* the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the innermost room of the tabernacle, and would offer a sacrifice for the sins of the Israelites (Lev. 16:29-34). Hebrew law demanded the death penalty for the people's sins, and so it was the duty of the high priest to make intercession for the people, to represent them before God Almighty, and to ask God's forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aish.com/h/hh/yom-kippur/stories/5-True-Stories-for-Yom-Kippur.html>. Site visited October 17, 2016.