

## December 19, 2021 (Advent IV) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Hebrews 8:8b–12](#)

TITLE: **Advent Love: What We Know to be True**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

The pivotal word in today's reading is the word "covenant." We'll talk about it in a moment, but first we have to deal with the two words used to modify "covenant"—old and new, as in "the old covenant I made with your ancestors" and "the new covenant I will now establish." If the marketing around the Christmas season has taught us anything, it is that old is bad and new is good. I was reminded of this when I recently had an issue with my iPhone and had to make one of those perilous appointments at the so-called Genius Bar at the Apple store. If ever there is a place where I felt less like a Genius, it was there. I glanced around the store as I waited for someone to help me, and when someone finally came over I asked "What is the latest type of Apple watch you sell?" To which came the reply, "Apple watch 7", which caused me to cover up my sturdy Apple watch 3." I then mentioned I was having issues with my phone. The salesperson noted that they had a special on the new Apple iPhone 13, but I shook my head to that suggestion as I handed her my trusty iPhone 6. And you should know that I wrote this very sermon on my faithful Dell computer that I bought in 2010.

Now that I've horrified everyone under 30 years of age, let's look again at old vs. new. We clearly have a bias against the one and a preference for the other. That may not be a big deal if we are talking about cars or cellphones, but it becomes problematic if we push this distinction too far as it relates to our Christian faith. We might be tempted to believe that God's Old Testament-old covenant with the people of Israel is no longer any good, and all that matters is the New Testament-new covenant revealed in Jesus Christ. But that can lead down a slippery slope of religious prejudice. In the Old Testament, we read about God's covenant with the people of Israel—with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses on Mount Sinai, and with David sitting on his throne in Jerusalem. If God's promises made to all those people are no longer valid, then God would be an untrustworthy God who doesn't keep God's word. That line of thought leads to anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish biases and is a stain on the faith we profess. Given the whole history of God's involvement with humanity, it is better to speak of an old, historic covenant that, in Christ Jesus, has been renewed—enlarged—written clearly now in our minds and on our hearts. With this new covenant, we honor the past even as we walk by faith into the future.

Let's now look at the word "covenant." A covenant is not a contract. Contracts are legally binding documents that force behavior from two parties. Their power comes from the letter of the law. Covenants are agreements mutually entered into in which two or more parties promise to act in each other's best interests. Sometimes one side does more than the other, but no one is really keeping score. A covenant's power comes from honoring the spirit of the law.

To help explain the concept of a covenant, there are three words I want you to repeat after me. This is also a way to make sure no one's dozed off. The words are "with," "for,"

and “unto.” God’s covenants are God’s commitment to be with us and vice versa. This is a covenant of presence—God revealed through the Torah, the law given on Mt. Sinai, and through the word and witness of the prophets of old. This same covenant was later renewed and expanded through God’s presence with us made known in Christ—through his incarnation at Bethlehem, the wisdom of Jesus’ parables and miracles, and the ongoing connection of the risen Christ with all of us.

Second, this covenant is not just something with us, it is also something for us. As a species and as individuals, we don’t have the best track record for honoring agreements and keeping promises. The very thing which we ought not to do, we do; and that which we ought to do, we don’t do. I’m not going to list off examples—you know what I’m talking about. Tom Long described covenants in this way: A covenant is a two-way arrangement in which people are to hold firmly to their end of the rope while God has promised to hold on the other end and pull us to a place of safety. But we grow weary and let go; however, God doesn’t. God keeps faith, holds onto that rope even when we don’t. God acts in covenants for us.

And why does God do this? Because every covenant has a purpose. It is directed unto some goal. These goals are bigger than any one of us, and they stretch far beyond today to the horizon of our tomorrows. It involves a hope that carries us even in the valley of the shadow of death. It involves a peace that passes all understanding. It involves a joy that is deeper than momentary happiness. And it involves a love that is healing, restorative, energizing all our relationships. Remember, the four Advent candles are lights of hope, peace, joy, and love. That’s why Advent is the perfect season to speak of God’s covenant renewed in Christ—because it’s a covenant made with us, for us, and directed unto God’s goal of the healing of the nations.

Now on to a new topic: Back in the 1970s, the psychologist Bruce Alexander was reviewing studies related to drug addiction. Several studies had placed rats in small cages and made it so that by depressing a lever, they would get a dose of heroin or cocaine. Typically the rats would hit the lever a lot, consume large doses of the drugs and become thoroughly addicted. This led everyone to focus on the addictive quality of drugs and thus drug prevention programs (like “Just Say No” or “This is your brain on drugs”) put all their energy into trying to keep people entirely away from drugs. Unfortunately, this method also put all the blame on the drug user, who many felt lacked the moral strength to just say “no.”

Bruce Alexander took a different approach. He knew that rats are social creatures, so instead of locking them alone in tiny cages, he built a “rat park” complete with toys for playing, plenty of food and water, and 16-20 rats of both genders to mingle with. All the rats could drink from a dispenser with plain water or one with heroin or morphine. They found that the Rat Park rats consistently refused the drugged water. None of the addictive behavior from the earlier studies could be replicated in this healthier setting. And even rats who had spent two months in cages living almost entirely on morphine water chose normal water when moved to the Rat Park, voluntarily going through drug withdrawal.

To me this illustrates our human tendency to think in terms of individual contracts, not covenants—to blame others and let go of our side of the rope that ties us to God and to one another. Yes, drugs are addictive, but given the fact that we are in the midst of a huge epidemic of drug related deaths, it is important to remember that blaming the user alone solves nothing and is morally defective. We exist in covenants with one another, which means we must speak up when people are put in solitary confinement; when people are pushed to the gutters with no resources when times get hard; when they're told they're to blame when they self-medicate and that they should just “figure something out” when things get rough.

Honoring covenants with and for one another should be something literally written on our hearts—something we know to be true deep in our souls. It shouldn't be just head knowledge. You can be absolutely clear about something in your head—believing that it is OK for a country like ours not to consistently offer paid family leave or provide universal childcare, or that it is appropriate for misguided rioters to storm the capitol and throw concrete blocks and fire extinguishers at police officers—and still be absolutely wrong. God wants to motivate our wills—for us never to forget that we are connected to one another all holding one end of the rope that extends into God's hands—and that it is only together that we will be pulled to safety, to peace, and into God's realm.

As a guide for this, I like something that George Orwell once wrote. Orwell is best known for his books “Animal Farm” and “1984.” He was passionate about improving the quality of life for all. At one point he said, that fighting for ‘bread for all” is important, but it alone isn't enough. He believed people also have a right to roses too—to a life in which beauty, creativity, and a rich interior life are possible.<sup>1</sup> Bread and roses. Head and heart. Covenant things known so well, so deeply, that you don't have to teach one another about it, since by God's grace and power you know it to be true.

My sermon is at its end and I haven't said the word “love” very often, even though that's the theme for this fourth Sunday in Advent. But the word “love” is over-used—it can feel like grape Kool-Aid, like a box of Krispy Kreme donuts, like a marathon of Hallmark channel movies. Advent Love is much deeper than that. It is a promise God has made to be with us always—a promise that took flesh on Christmas, that allowed that flesh to be wounded on Good Friday and put on a cross, and yet which broke forth from the tomb to shine its light of love even now, 2000 years later. Advent Love holds on to the rope that binds us together. Advent Love talks of life in the first person plural (we are in this together) and talks of bread and roses. Advent Love keeps looking at what is to come—and finds strength for today through our hope for tomorrow. It's old, really old—yet in Christ it's what we know to be true. For this good news, thanks be to God!

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Book Review by Suzannah Lessard of Orwell's Roses by Rebecca Solnit, 2021; NY Times Book Review, December 5, 2021, p. 66.