

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. It was a Wednesday in early September when many of us awoke last year to skies that looked like they were from another world.
1. Even after the sun had risen, the skies remained dark and filled with a yellow orange hue. People came out of their homes and stood on sidewalks and in streets taking photos of the strange apocalyptic sky, pictures that confounded the smartphone filters and couldn't quite reflect what was being seen on the ground.
 2. It was wildfire season, and one of the worst in history, and the impact on that particular day was an eery example of the way our climate is changing and the impacts that that may have on the livability of the gorgeous place we call home here in the Bay Area. It was a sobering day to witness.
 3. But for Jason and I, the day also resonated in a unique way. This day was the end of our 10 day contingency period for the house we were under contract to purchase. The whole process had been a whirlwind, in which after only three weeks of formally looking at houses, we had our first offer accepted, something we had in no way expected to happen. Now this was our last day to make a final decision on whether we wanted to move forward with investing all of our worldly assets in a piece of property in Berkeley, or whether we wanted to walk away from this house altogether.
 4. Jason and I had been doing everything we could leading up to this day to confirm that this home would work for us. All the questions we'd hoped to answer weren't resolved, but there were reasons to hope things could all work out well if we went ahead. Still, it was clear it would be a bit of a leap of faith. We spent sleepless nights tossing and turning leading up to that September day.
 5. And then we awoke to dark orange skies. Was this some sort of ominous sign? Was the universe telling us "Don't do it!" In big orange letters? As the day went on and our deadline approached there was a mix of emotions: fear, hope, frustration at what we couldn't know that day, concern for the future. But then, as we acknowledged both our anxieties but also our reasons for moving forward, there arose a different kind of feeling: resolve. Yes, there was uncertainty about how this house would work, there was concern about what the future held for Berkeley and the Bay Area, but we also felt clearly our attachment to this city.
 6. Jason and I had been on such a journey before we ever moved to the Bay Area, hoping and praying that we could someday make a life here in Berkeley, that he could work as an engineer here, that I could start a faith community, that we could raise our children and send them to Berkeley schools. And all of those things were happening. Now six years in, we felt called to Berkeley as much, if not more, than we ever had.
 7. It was no longer aspirational, this was the place we were putting down roots. We understood more than we once had the weaknesses of this place, the inconsistencies, the challenges, the disappointments, and yes, the real climate risks of making a life here. But we also understood that there were people we loved here, there was a culture we appreciated, there was a sense of purpose we each felt called to as we sought to participate in our own way in helping this place become more just, more equitable, more livable for all.
 8. And so a kind of resolve took root that said "Damn the smoke. Damn the flames. This is our home and we've been given an opportunity that may not come again to invest in this place more deeply than we've yet been able to do. So if the city's going down fighting, we'll be fighting with it."

9. We called our realtor and told her to remove the contingencies. We popped a bottle of champagne. We looked at the orange sky and made a toast to Berkeley and our new home here and we felt both gratitude and gravity. Whatever the future held for us here, we understood more deeply, we were committed to it.
- B. I share this story to introduce our topic for today, as we come into the home stretch on our “Recovering the Sacred” series. We’re coming towards the end of this look at Ezra and Nehemiah that we’ve been doing, though we will be long in the process of “reorder” we’ve been naming.
- C. In this series we’re considering how this particular community, whose story is told in these two books, rebuilt after a time of disruption and trauma, just as we ourselves are trying to do now.
1. Today’s story invites us to consider some of what Jason and I were considering that strange September day.
- II. So there’s a lot of text to the story that’s told throughout chapters 9 and 10 of Nehemiah. I’ll be summarizing some of it and then reading excerpts. If you’d like you can go back and read the whole thing later. The setup is that a few weeks after the people held a rally where they listened to sacred texts being read and then they enacted an ancient festival based on hearing them, and continued to reacquaint themselves with their history through these stories, they hold another communal assembly, which seems to be a time of response to all that they’ve been discovering. And it begins with a session of repentance where the people are confessing the ways they’ve fallen short of what they believe God intended for them. They wear sackcloth and put ashes on their heads as they communally confess their sins. And then a group of leaders, named as the Levites, invite all the people to rise and to pray this confessional prayer on behalf of all the people assembled. We’ll pick up the story with the beginning of that prayer.
- A. ***“May you be blessed, O Lord our God, from age to age. May your glorious name be blessed; may it be lifted up above all blessing and praise. 6 You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, along with all their multitude of stars, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You impart life to them all, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.***

7 “You are the Lord God who chose Abram and brought him forth from Ur of the Chaldeans. You changed his name to Abraham. 8 When you perceived that his heart was faithful toward you, you established a covenant with him to give his descendants the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and the Girgashites. You have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.

9 “You saw the affliction of our ancestors in Egypt, and you heard their cry at the Red Sea. 10 You performed awesome signs against Pharaoh, against his servants, and against all the people of his land, for you knew that the Egyptians had acted presumptuously against them. You made for yourself a name that is celebrated to this day. (The prayer goes on to describe in more detail the delivery from slavery in Egypt, the provision of food and drink in the wilderness, and the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai.” Picking up after that...)

16 “But they—our ancestors—behaved presumptuously; they rebelled and did not obey your commandments. 17 They refused to obey and did not recall your miracles that you had performed among them. Instead, they rebelled and appointed a leader to return to

their bondage in Egypt. But you are a God of forgiveness, merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and unfailing in your loyal love. You did not abandon them, 18 even when they made a cast image of a calf for themselves and said, 'This is your God who brought you up from Egypt,' or when they committed atrocious blasphemies.

19 "Due to your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud did not stop guiding them in the path by day, nor did the pillar of fire stop illuminating for them by night the path on which they should travel.....(The prayer goes on like this with more accounting of Israel's history including God's initiative to care for them, the people's rebellion, and God's merciful response.)

32 "So now, our God—the great, powerful, and awesome God, who keeps covenant fidelity—do not regard as inconsequential all the hardship that has befallen us—our kings, our leaders, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all your people—from the days of the kings of Assyria until this very day. 33 You are righteous with regard to all that has happened to us, for you have acted faithfully. It is we who have been in the wrong! 34 Our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our ancestors have not kept your law. They have not paid attention to your commandments or your testimonies by which you have solemnly admonished them. 35 Even when they were in their kingdom and benefiting from your incredible goodness that you had lavished on them in the spacious and fertile land you had set before them, they did not serve you, nor did they turn from their evil practices.

36 "So today we are slaves! In the very land you gave to our ancestors to eat its fruit and to enjoy its good things—we are slaves. 37 Its abundant produce goes to the kings you have placed over us due to our sins. They rule over our bodies and our livestock as they see fit, and we are in great distress!

38 (10:1) "Because of all this we are entering into a binding covenant in written form; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests have affixed their names on the sealed document."

10 On the sealed documents were the following names:

Nehemiah the governor, son of Hacaliah, along with Zedekiah,

2 Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, ...(The account goes on from there with a total of 82 names of various leaders listed. I'll spare you the rest of the names and skip to the end of the list.)

"Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple attendants, and all those who have separated themselves from the neighboring peoples because of the law of God, along with their wives, their sons, and their daughters, all of whom are able to understand— 29 hereby participate with their colleagues the town leaders and enter into a curse and an oath to adhere to the law of God which was given through Moses the servant of God, and to obey carefully all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, along with his ordinances and his statutes.

30 "We will not give our daughters in marriage to the neighboring peoples, and we will not take their daughters in marriage for our sons. 31 We will not buy on the Sabbath or on a holy day from the neighboring peoples who bring their wares and all kinds of grain

to sell on the Sabbath day. We will let the fields lie fallow every seventh year, and we will cancel every loan...

And in summary the chapter goes on from there with a list of more pledges the people are making together to follow the laws as they understand them that they believe God had given to Moses, finally ending the great pledge with the last verse of chapter 10, as the people say ***“We will not neglect the temple of our God.”***

- B. So what is the story about? And what might it have to do with any of us?
1. Essentially these two chapters of Nehemiah that I've been reading from tell the story of the community in Jerusalem of former exiles gathering to formally **renew a covenant** that they believe was made between God and their people. They are with a lot of pomp and circumstance and proclamation making a solemn pledge to Yahweh. And as Nehemiah relates it, this clearly is an important part of the restoration of their community.
 2. So why is this moment so critical for this story? To get a sense of that, we need to start with a better understanding of the practice which is at the center of the drama; the practice of making a “covenant”.
- C. What is a covenant? If you've studied the Bible much in the past, you may be familiar with this term. It's one that gets a lot of play, particularly in the Hebrew Bible.
1. **A covenant, as it appears throughout scriptures, is a kind of sacred commitment.** It's like a contract - a very serious promise between two parties that is often bound by some sort of oath or vow. Throughout the Bible, covenants appear as agreements of deep spiritual significance between God, known as Yahweh in much of the Hebrew Bible, and the people whose story is being followed. As we heard in the text today, these people understand themselves to be in a unique relationship with the Divine that has been solidified through the years through a series of covenants that were established between Yahweh and their ancestors.
 2. There was a covenant between Yahweh and Abraham. As Genesis tells the story, God called the man named Abram to go to the land he was calling him to and promised to make him a great nation and bless his descendants. God even promised that through Abraham's descendants eventually the whole world would be blessed. The covenant was renewed and more deeply formalized after Yahweh called Moses to help deliver the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, when they were given the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai. And so on throughout their history. The connection the people have with God has been established and developed for centuries through the practice of making covenants.
 3. But where does this practice come from? Why are these formal commitment ceremonies the way the relationship with God seems to be constructed? A study of ancient history demonstrates that the practice of covenanting is not unique to the people of Israel. It was actually an important practice throughout the ancient world. From the earliest times that groups of people were relating there were reasons for them to make formal agreements around how they would relate - the origins of what we might call “social contracts”. It makes sense, especially in primitive cultures in which there were not strong legal systems to regulate and enforce how people treated one another, there had to be ways of establishing norms of relating, and this often happened through sacred promises or covenants. In the era leading up to the development of the Israelite tribes one of the primary sources we see of the importance of these kinds of formal commitments in the ancient world comes from the Hittite culture.
 - a) The Hittites were a strong military people and often when they drew up a covenant it was to define the terms of the relationship they would have with a group that they were now taking under their authority. The covenants were there to establish the relationship

and often make the case that this relationship was not just beneficial to the Hittites, but in the interest of the party who was coming under their authority, too. Hittite covenants all followed the same basic formula: they generally included a preamble or an introduction, a historical prologue telling the story of their people, they made stipulations that the people were promising to commit to, there were provisions for where the covenant would be stored and how it would be publicly read, there was a list of witnesses to the covenant, which often included an appeal to the gods, and there was a series of curses and blessings to enforce the covenant. Sacrifices were often made to secure the covenant, which in a sense enacted the consequences of breaking it, allowing the one making the pledge to name “If I break the terms of this, I will be like this slaughtered animal.”

- b) So as you can see from our story, many of these elements are found in Israelite covenant practices as well. But rather than establishing a relationship between two groups of people, the Israelite covenants establish a relationship between the people and God, entrusting that God is connected to them and will bless them and care for them, and that the people in turn will be faithful in their worship of the Divine.
- c) Understanding that norms for relating in the ancient world were often established through these kind of formal processes and even documents like covenants, it makes total sense that we’d see these covenants throughout the faith tradition of the Hebrew people. It’s as if God, who is beyond culture and time, was relating to this particular people through the cultural language they had for bringing people together. As the Hebrew people connected with Yahweh, they understood the Divine to be promising to care for them and bless them through these pledges, and the story of their history was the story of God continuing to be faithful to those promises even when the people of Israel didn’t hold up their part of the bargain.

III. So that might help us understand what those former exiles were doing in this story. After learning more about the covenants they believed had been established between their ancestors and Yahweh, they wanted to take on those sacred promises for themselves, to renew the covenant in their time. They wanted to renew that relationship their ancestors had had. But we live in a very different world than the Israelites, or even the early Christians. So what significance does any of this covenanting hold for us?

- A. Let’s be honest: we inhabit a world that has a very different relationship with the idea of commitment altogether. Covenanting is not how we relate to people. In our current time and culture, marriage is probably the commitment we hear folks talk about as the most significant or “sacred”, and yet even that doesn’t often carry a lot of weight. Around half of marriages in the US eventually end in divorce, which is perhaps why more and more couples choose not to get married at all. Truthfully, in our culture, the idea of binding commitments can feel foreign, and if we’re honest, pretty intense, maybe even scary.
 - 1. Some of that may just be because we’re not use to these kind of commitments. Strong social commitments aren’t something we may have had much experience with.
 - 2. Others of us have had commitments we’ve been called to that ultimately were negative. Perhaps we were in an abusive marriage. Or perhaps we’ve been in religious communities that have used these kind of calls to firm commitment in abusive ways, as a way to control people by insisting that to love and please God, you need to do certain things like give money to the church, attend certain events, serve in specific ways. That whole experience may have been toxic, and left folks feeling burned, so considering committing to groups or people now can feel really yucky.

B. Of course, throughout this series I've been sharing some insights from Father Richard Rohr. We've been talking about his theory that the journey of personal and spiritual growth is a journey through cycles of order, disorder and reorder. For Father Richard Rohr, the work of moving from disorder into reorder is the invitation to "Include and transcend".

1. A number of you were out of town when I shared this explanation of Rohr's on what that means, so I'll share a bit of that passage here once again.

a) *The human preference for binary thinking has kept us from seeing that when history evolves with a new idea, cultural mood, or consciousness, we need not (dare not, actually!) completely exclude the previous idea, mood, or consciousness.*

We grow best by including what was good and lasting in the previous stage and avoiding the overreaction and rebellious spirit that have characterized most revolutions up to now. This demands both humility and the capacity for non-dual thinking, qualities that are rare in most zealots, reformers, and revolutionaries....

This nonviolent compromise can most simply be stated as include and transcend. It is at the core of what we mean by wisdom and by nonviolence.

As it applies here, we can trust and even need certain kinds of "disorder" to clarify what our original "order" meant, lacked, or intended. ...

If we can rightly achieve an integration of original plan plus correctives, rule plus "the exception that proves the rule," order plus disorder, we have what I am calling reorder!

2. If Rohr's logic is correct, then there is something helpful to be carried forward from the ancient custom of making formal commitments, like covenants. Yes, in some ways those commitments may have been used by people in power to bolster their control, and that practice we want to transcend. I'm not interested in asking everyone in Haven to enact anew what the Jewish community did in Jerusalem 2500 years ago. But I do wonder if they were on to something helpful in that instinct they had to renew a sacred commitment? What about that practice of making covenants might we want to include in our own reordering?

C. As I've been thinking about what is it about commitments that seems useful this week, a couple of things have come to mind for me.

1. The first is that I think to have a sense of commitment is **helpful for others we are in relationship with**. Having a sense that others take seriously a relationship and are willing to show up, even through challenge, establishes a sense of safety. Of course this is true ideally in marriage or family life, but it goes beyond that too. As someone whose done a lot of theatre and music in my life, I understood from a young age that my cast mates or choir mates or band mates were counting on me, and if I didn't show up, or if I didn't play the parts they were expecting me to play, I would really let them down. They needed me and I needed them to follow through. I remember one incident in which a kid I was in a play with had a total lack of commitment to the cast and what we were doing together. And so in the middle of a performance, he just decided the whole thing was ridiculous. As I shared a scene with him, instead of saying his lines, he just started laughing at me. Eventually he walked off the stage. I ad libbed the best I could, but it was horrible. Demonstrating commitment communicates to others that we can be trusted to show up and support them, just as we also want to be supported.

2. But I don't think commitments are simply about what they do for others. **I think there's an element of them that's also helpful for ourselves.** When a doctor swears the hypocritical oath, when a witness is sworn in before testifying, when a pastor takes an ordination vow, in an ideal world it does something internally. It calls you to take what you're doing seriously. You're making yourself accountable in a deeper way. I think this sense of making commitments for our selves has to be a part of it when we think of spiritual commitments. I don't think God needs me to promise anything in terms of my spirituality. God is able to take care of themselves. My promise to show up isn't going to make God feel more safe, but it is helpful for me to recognize that I have set an intention to pursue a spiritual path, to honor the Divine as I understand them, and that intention calls me forward. It calls me to continue the spiritual journeying, even when things feel hard.
 - a) Something helpful about the season of covid was that in a sense all of our commitments were upended. Covid gave us all an opportunity to bow out of any and all social obligations. And for many of us, that was helpful. Some of us have a hard time saying no, and we may have become over-committed, going along with things just because we felt like we had to, not because we really wanted to invest our time and energy in them.
 - b) As we go forward, we have the opportunity to rethink our connection to various communities, organizations, friendships, and so on. And as we do that rethinking, we may decide that there are some things we don't really want to pick up again. Lots of people quitting jobs they never really loved for that reason.
 - c) But we also have the opportunity to choose where in our reordering, personal commitments are something we want to include. I'm not here to tell you what those specific commitments should be. I'm not going to be prescribing a certain way of committing to Haven in this season, just to be clear. But I am going to invite each of us to consider where the Divine might be inviting us to think more deeply about we hold commitment and what new commitments it might be meaningful for us to take up in this season.
3. I'll share one personal example of that as we end. As we've been in this season of reordering and beginning to gather as a community in new ways after covid, Jeanne and I have felt a stirring to be more prayerful on behalf of all of you and on behalf of our community. We've both felt I think independently and as a staff a desire to spend less of our staff time just working on logistics and more of our time in worship and prayer for the Haven community.
 - a) And that's recently led us to restructure our meeting times, and to honor a new commitment we are feeling led to make: to commit to praying for folks in the Haven community in a more systematic way. So we are going to be establishing a new habit in the coming weeks, something I saw modeled by a church I was involved in many years ago. Each week, we're going to be praying specifically for a household in the Haven community. All of you will be in the rotation. I'll reach out a week before we hope to pray for you and ask if you have any specific requests that Jeanne and I can be praying for, and if you're open to us sharing that with the intercessors, like Connie, Sylvia, and others who pray on Thursday evenings, we'll do that too. If you don't have anything specific, we'll just be lifting you up and asking for God's blessing on your life, whatever that looks like.
 - b) Now we're not committing to this as the pastors of this church because we believe that something magical happens when the pastors pray that wouldn't happen otherwise. I'll be honest, the fundamentals of how and why prayer functions is a mystery to me, but a

component I know from experience, and the reason that Jeanne and I make this commitment is that we recognize that praying for you has an important impact on us. It softens our hearts toward each of you. We root for your rising in important ways when we intentionally invest our devotional time and heart space to your blessing. And both of us want more of that in our hearts and in our community.

- D. So as we end, I invite you to day to consider what this ancient practice of covenant making might hold for you today? Where would it be helpful for you to formalize some commitment to others or to God? What practical steps might formalizing that include? Where are the places you feel called to say “damn the flames, I need to be here”? My prayer is that as we do that we’ll also find the comfort and freedom that can come from knowing we are in something for the long haul. It was only after we made the decision about our house that I could actually feels some sort of joy and freedom in the process. No longer were we being controlled by uncertainty. There was something comforting in knowing that, while we couldn’t predict the future, or know how everything would work out, we could predict where we would be in that unknown future. As Jason and I approach 20 years of marriage, I have many times felt the same comfort from the way we have held our marriage vows. Rather than constraining me, they have given me the freedom to relax and feel safe, knowing that whatever life brings, I know who I’m going to face it with. Perhaps this too is what the Divine wanted those ancestors to understand: that God is committed to them and however faithful or faithless they may be, always will be. I pray that we can experience that truth anew ourselves, and we can give thanks for all of the ways we have been sustained through such challenging circumstances. May the security of the Divine’s commitment to all of us give us strength as well as the wisdom to discern what we are called to honor together. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What reactions do you generally have to the word “commitment”?
2. How have your relationships with others been shaped for better or worse by a high or low sense of commitment?
3. What kinds of commitments might you feel called to in this season?