How does God interact with human beings? What kind of relationship does God seek with us? The Bible has a consistent response to these fundamental questions: God desires to be in covenantal relationship with us. God’s building block with us is through a covenant.

God does not choose a relationship of convenience with us, or a fleeting relationship. God wants to be in covenant with us.

“I will make a covenant between me and you,” God said to Abraham (Gen. 17:2). To Moses, God said, “I am making a covenant with you, before all your people.” (Ex 34:10) The word of God came to Jeremiah in Jerusalem, directed to the people of Israel still in exile in Babylon, declaring, “The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah.” (Jere. 31:31) And when God was most disappointed with Israel, after promising destruction for their waywardness, still yet God said, “I will make a covenant of peace with them.” (Eze 34:25) When Israel was divided into two nations, God promised to make the two nations one, saying, “I will make an everlasting covenant with them.” (Eze 37:26) Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised, “Come, all who you are thirsty, come to the waters and I will make an everlasting covenant with you.” (Isa 55:1,3b) “In the same way, after supper, Jesus took the cup saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you.’” (Lk 22:20) Generations before, when Noah had been told to build an ark, God promised, “I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark.” (Gen. 6:18) After the flood waters receded, God set Noah and his family upon dry land once again. “And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I will be making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and all life on the earth.” (9:12f) Today, we are children of that covenant.

Clearly, God was shaping a relationship with the children of Israel, one covenant after another, one building block upon another, first with Noah and then with each successive generation. One covenant after another had been broken, yet God persisted, “I will make a covenant of peace with them.”

In Joshua’s day, the people of Israel were worshipping false idols, just like their neighboring tribes. And Joshua warned the people, “You cannot take God lightly, for our God is holy and values your faithfulness.” And the people decided on that day to turn from their false idols and to enter into a covenantal relationship with their God.

What is a covenant? A covenant is a vow, a pledge between two or more entities. Marriage is a covenanted relationship. Business partners might typically enter into a covenant.
Stephanie, Victor and I are in a covenantal relationship as your pastoral team. We listen to each other. We respect each other. We support each other. A covenant is not a creed; it isn’t a statement of belief; it answers the question: What does God expect of us and what do we expect of each other?

We are already in covenantal relationship at First Baptist Church. We couldn’t exist, we wouldn’t be healthy, if we weren’t bound together in pledged love. We know that one of the very first acts of our church when it was founded by ten charter members in 1855 was to enter into a covenant. Before the mid-1800’s, each Baptist church wrote its own covenant. And we don’t know the exact shape of our original covenant. But we do know of three versions of our covenant that date back to 1860’s, and these are all based on what is called the New Hampshire Covenant, which became popular during that time. If you grew up Baptist, you probably know this covenant because nearly every church adopted it.

Our financial pledges are symbolic of our covenant together. We have an unspoken covenant that each Fall, we will look ahead to the new year and together make pledges and promises to the church that will enable our church to move forward. Most of us practice sacrificial giving, and many practice tithing. But together, through our promises, we undergird the ministries of our church. If some do not do their part – we all suffer. If some step back instead of step forward, it causes all of us to step back.

Our care for each other is an expression of our unspoken covenant. If you have a health challenge, or face a loss of any kind, you can count on the rest of us to surround you, to pray for you and to support you through your crisis. We’ll be there for you. Time and again, I have seen our members pull through in support of each other. Part of our covenant is to let others know of our joys and our concerns and when we do, we pledge to stand beside one another. Every Sunday morning, we use prayer cards to express our particular love for one another.

When I have been a pastoral candidate in churches through the years, I’ve always faced one question: what are your plans for our church? It is a very difficult question to answer, because you don’t fully know the church or its context. But it is a difficult question for another reason: it isn’t the role of the pastor to dictate plans. Pastors who come into a congregation and say, “Now, we’re going to do it my way,” do real violence to a congregation. That is not our role.

I have always been suspect of long-range planning. In fact, I urged this church not to have in place a long-range planning committee because it isn’t our job to plan long-range for this church. That, friends, is God’s role.

Three years ago, we would have not had any idea that two of our neighboring churches would close. We couldn’t have known that the neighborhood food pantry would come our way. Or that the pantry would forge the way to restore lost relationships among the neighboring Red Bridge congregations. We couldn’t have known that we would become the voting station for our nearest precinct. We couldn’t have known whether launching jazz vespers in south Kansas City, fairly remote from the jazz centers downtown and midtown, would work. We couldn’t have known that a growing group of young adults would emerge from five different nationalities. We
couldn’t have known about Dezo, nor did she know about God’s call to enter seminary, and all the joy that has come to us from her. We couldn’t have known that we would take a mission group to Tijuana or next January to Nicaragua.

No long-range planning team could have come up with that. This is God’s doing. This is the Spirit of God active in our midst. Instead of planning, we should be ready, prepare to be nimble, to be responsive. So that when the winds of change come to us through the Holy Spirit, we are ready to move. Jesus never said, “My disciples should plan.” But he repeatedly said, “My disciples should be ready.” And he repeated, “Stay awake!” (Mt. 25:13; 24:42; Luke 12:35-40) He said, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet. Be ready to open the door as soon as he knocks.” (Lk 12:35-37)

Because Baptists do not have creeds or bishops, our relationships are voluntary. But voluntary relationships alone can be unreliable unless we are in covenantal relationship. You wake up on Sunday morning. You just don’t feel like participating in church. You stay home. Does this strengthen our church? Does it strengthen your spiritual life? Does it strengthen your relationships here? What if someone here anticipated your being here and needed to share a trial they are facing, and you were absent? It’s a pledge we make to come together, whenever possible, on Sunday mornings that is an expression of our covenant.

The moment covenants became standardized, and not particular to each church, they began to lose their power. Today, it is unusual to find a Baptist church that cherishes its covenant. Our written covenant has so many word expressions out of the 1800’s, that it sounds very dated, very old-fashioned, not suited for today’s church.

That makes me sad – because as Baptists we need to be keenly aware of our promises to each other and with God. Let me use marriage as an example. Marriages are covenants. I just returned from officiating at my nephew’s wedding in Portland. What a joyous week-end for Darrin and Annie and their families.

I think for many years I misunderstood young couples living together before getting married. I used to attribute it to a fear of making commitments, of treating relationships as casual. But I think that was too flippant. Young people watched the marriages of their parents’ generation, and they didn’t want to go through the pain of separation and divorce. And precisely because they took seriously the vows of marriage, they didn’t want to rush into it and make a mistake. It was too important and too respected for that. Many couples living together do eventually get married.

Even so, mistaking casual or convenient relationships for covenantal relationships is an extreme mistake. Without pledging oneself to another person, it is so easy just to walk out the door when things get complicated or inconvenient. And there is no such thing as long-term romantic love or friendship without some complications and some inconveniences.

Covenantal vows are the glue that hold marriages together in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad. It is challenging to keep committed relationships going these days.
Who hasn’t wanted to walk out of a marriage? I wouldn’t believe you for a moment if you told me it hadn’t crossed your mind – unless, of course, you’ve only been married a few months. We can end covenants. Some unhealthy marriages must come to an end. My covenant with you as your pastor cannot be forever. We just passed my third anniversary here, and when this started, we talked in terms of ten years together. If so, we haven’t even reached one-third of our time together. I’ve so enjoyed these three years I don’t even think about the ending.

A young boy had just gotten his driving permit. He asked his father if they could discuss the use of the family car. His father offered him this agreement: “if you bring your grades up, study your Bible, and get your hair cut, I’ll let you use the car.” After a month, the boy came back to his father and asked if they could discuss the use of the family car again. The father said, “Son, I’ve been real proud of you. You brought your grades up, studied your Bible more than I expected, but you didn’t get your hair cut.”

The young son replied, “You know, dad, I’ve been thinking about that. My thinking is that Samson had long hair. Moses had long hair. Noah had long hair. And Jesus had long hair.”

The father interjected, “Yes, and they walked everywhere they went.”

God uses covenants as building blocks to create shalom on this earth. Think for a moment where you would be if you had no commitments to any one? If you refused to make promises to anyone? Businesses would fall apart. Partnerships wouldn’t exist. Marriages and friendships and family relationships wouldn’t exist if not for the promises we make to each other. Churches would utterly fall apart without covenant relationships. Almost every human enterprise depends upon trusted agreements: I will do this – you can count on me – and you will do that – and I can count on you. When people live up to these promises, life is filled with promises kept. When people fail their promises, life is empty with promises ignored.

In three churches I have served, new covenants were written. It involved every member of the church and every age group. It involved asking the question: What does God expect of us? And what do we expect of each other? And when new members join, they know what is expected. Just the writing of a church covenant is a spiritual exercise – it enlivens a congregation to put in their own imaginative words the vows they are willing to make with God and with each other. God uses covenants as building blocks to shape the church. A church is only as good as its promises. Just as in marriages, covenant is the glue that holds a church together. Baptists are people of the covenant.

Our covenant will be unlike any other – it will be in our own unique words – our own unique ideas – our own unique vows. It could speak of our pledge to pray for each other, support one another, support the church with financial and leadership gifts. It could speak of how we will act when we disagree, how we will turn to reconciliation if we divide. It could speak of how we will seek to make a difference in the wider community. It could speak of a vow to keep growing, to center upon the Bible, to protect our Baptist liberties, to respect the varied voices in our congregation.
When Jan and I were first married, I had moved to Columbia and took my last semester at the University of Missouri, where Jan was a student. During those four months, we attended the Ecumenical House Church in Columbia. We were the only students in this church, even though the church met next to the campus. And the people of the church were so thrilled that we chose to join them. And both of us helped design and lead worship services, and we became deeply involved in so many aspects of that creative congregation. We really enjoyed those relationships even though we were twenty years younger than anyone else.

On our final Sunday in Columbia, we woke up, and we were tired, and we said to each other, “It’s our last Sunday. Let’s just skip church.” And so we did. Unbeknownst to us, the members of that church had designed the worship service that day so that they could say goodbye to us, and express their blessing upon us, and hold a reception in our honor. We encountered one of the members early the next week, just before we left town, and that is when we learned that by staying away, we had missed this special Sunday devoted to saying goodbye to us and missed receiving a gracious and blessed send-off. We felt terrible….to have disappointed people who had meant so much to us.

Covenantal relationships are significant and profound. If we get clear as to the promises we are making to God and to each other, there could be no stronger foundation upon which to build. When we get clear with God and with one another, about our covenant of faithful pledges, then we can build an even stronger future for this historic church.

We live in the most individualistic nation on earth. And we live in an age of individuality, of privacy, of anonymity. Relationships of convenience are the order of the day. We shy away from commitments. We have become a narcissistic “me-oriented” society.

And unless we pull together as a people, as a church, the societal forces around us will pull us apart. We could all stay home and watch the television preachers. Or we could go to the huge mega-churches and be anonymous. But that doesn’t describe our church. We are here because we want to be here. We are here where we are known, where we can depend upon one another, where beautiful things happen because relationships matter. We are here to join hearts together and through pledged love, discover a new anchor for our families, our marriages, our friendships, and our lives.

Covenants are God’s building blocks in our homes, our marriages, in our friendships, in all our pursuits, and in our church.

Joshua knew he was near the end of his life. It had been his life goal to build Israel into a faithful nation. As an old man, he fears that Israel will return to a worship of idols as they have done in the past. And so Joshua says to all the gathered tribes of Israel, “If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your early ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

And the people answered Joshua with one voice, saying, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our
ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us,” and gave us this land. “Therefore, we will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

“So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day… Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and he took a large stone and ….set it in the sanctuary of the Lord. Joshua said to all the people, “See this stone shall be a witness: for it has heard all the words” of our covenant with God.

After this covenant was entered into, “Joshua, son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being 110 years old,” and he was buried in the hill country. It was the opportune time to covenant. It was their Kairos Moment – just as I believe this is our Kairos Moment.

If you also choose to worship and serve the Lord your God, who has been so faithful to you, who has blessed you and guided you, then stand with us now and help us shape a covenant that will serve as our guide into future years. Choose this day whom you will serve!

Let this house, let this family of faith, this People of God, serve the Lord! Amen.