

“Covenants Full of Promise”

B, Lent Two; Genesis 9:1-17

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. COVENANTS, PRAYERS AND PROMISES

A boat. A BIG boat. A faithful man—willing to buck the tide, and put up with the ridicule of neighbors and naysayers alike. A family. A large, ever-expanding family in Noah’s Grandfather Phase—willing to follow him *onto* that big boat. To bring in those crazy pairs of animals of every species.

Whether it was one pair/two of each species or the newly suspected *seven* pairs—it matters not all that much. For, how many of *you* could convince your daughters-in-law to pack up the kids, their blankies, their stuffed animals, strollers and countless “stuff needed” for babies and children, and haul it all onto a huge boat that “Pops” was insisting was **the** way to go—in spite of not a cloud in the sky or a drop of rain anywhere on the land?!

A boat. A man. A family. Countless furry ones. And then, a Flood. I won’t recount the *whole* story for you—for *you* have the tools! Go back to Genesis Chapter 7, or even 6, and read that story from where it starts in the imagination of the Creator in dialogue with his faithful right-hand man Noah.

“What to do about this mess the world was in? Hmmm....”

In a nutshell, God decides that the world needs a *reboot*. Needs to power-down and do a scrub of the operating system. Literally! At that point, God can’t figure out *any* other solution. Attempted repairs and running virus software have *not* restored the world to running as it should.

It’s time to reboot! Do-over. Try again. This whole “human experiment has not gone the best!

II. AFTER THE WATER IS OVER—COVENANT

A boat. A storm. A *lot* of rain. A *long* time in that big boat. And after the storm was over? A *covenant*.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹“I now establish my **covenant** with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

And *with* the covenant? A sign. A promise with bright and colorful proof—hard to miss!

¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to

destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

So, we know what *rainbows* are, right? “My bow in the sky” is the ancient lingo for, “I’m gonna give you a rainbow. A reminder. A promise. An unmistakable piece of evidence that I am with you. I have re-thought my approach, and I’m not going to do this plan anymore. It just doesn’t work well.

I’m not going to use the Reboot Option ever again. I didn’t like how that turned out. And, furthermore, we need to work *together*, as a Team, be a troop together in this life from here on out.

This moment is also quite profound. For the deities in those days that humankind had experience of did *not* stoop to this level of collaboration with mere mortals. God’s promise never to reboot creation again is an unheard-of surrendering of divine power.

This covenant God enters into with Noah and his family is a radical step! It shows a side of God humankind may not have seen before: “inherently self-giving, willing to enter into a relationship that puts limits on even God’s prerogatives. Apparently, even God needs to be reminded, in this case by a beautiful bow (ironically, an ancient weapon) in the sky, of a promise God makes, out of tenderness and compassion for creation.” (David Lose)

III. WHAT COVENANT MEANS

Covenant—Berit’

So, we know what rainbows are. And we know what promises look like, but what exactly is a **covenant**? Is it just another word for “promise?”

The term “covenant” is of Latin origin (*con venire*), meaning a *coming together*. It’s when two or more parties who come together to make a contract—a deal.

Agreeing on promises, privileges and responsibilities. It can mean a lifelong friendship agreement of many kinds or refer to a marriage. When we went on our Mission Trip to Alaska last year, we sat down together the first evening and created a Covenant for how we would be community together.

There are a lot of nuances to “covenant” and different understandings of all the covenants in the Bible and since then, but the best way to grasp it is to think of “bond.” The Hebrew word is *berit’*. In a *berit’*, a bond, two or more parties are *bound* together. They make a binding agreement.

Many pairs of people or parties in the Bible make a binding agreement to live and work in peace together. A friendship bond was sealed by oath between David and Jonathan. Marriage is a bond (covenant) for life.

IV. WHAT COVENANT MEANT FOR NOAH

In this particular covenant, we learn a few things about God. First of all, that it’s God’s idea—not Noah’s.

God initiates the whole plan, and wants to make promises and give reassurance. God is the one who comes up with the idea of a promise, along with a reminder in the rainbow.

We see a God who is “adaptable, touched to the heart by creation, and willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive. Who refuses to give up on us. A God whose heart is touched by creation’s suffering. The God declaring this covenant is not an objective judge dishing out a just sentence, but a lover grieved to the heart at the beloved’s violence, yet still seeking reconciliation.” (Allen).

V. WHAT COVENANT MEANS FOR ANIMALS!

We also see a God is also all about the animals! It says right there in the story: God is establishing God's covenant with "every living creature."

Here's a fun little branch-off to looking at what covenant means to *all* creatures::

Animals, Human and Otherwise (Quinn Caldwell)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark." - Genesis 9:8-17

Did you catch that? In today's story, which comes near the end of the whole ark episode, God makes a covenant not just with Noah and his descendants, but *with every living animal, everywhere.*

How does one make a covenant with an animal? A covenant is a contract, pure and simple, an agreement between two parties that spells out how they will behave with one another. "If you give me X, I will give you Y." "If I do this, you will do that."

So what is the birds' quid to God's quo? What is it that God needs, or even wants, enough to make a contract with zebras? What could dinosaurs or dolphins possibly do that's enough to pay for God's offer of a future?

It turns out that what your cat can offer God for her salvation is just what you can offer: exactly nothing. It turns out that covenants with God aren't quite the same as covenants with everyone else. It turns out that with God, it's not so much a quid pro quo as a quid pro nil. The promise, the salvation, the future on offer to every living thing is free, and there's nothing you or your cat can do to earn it, or to lose it.

So why don't you go find an animal you know, and celebrate?

Prayer (best said while holding or snuggling your favorite animal)

God, I thank you that in you, through you, and with you, the world, the animals, and I have a future. Amen.

VI. WHAT COVENANT MEANS—SCOUTS

So. Have you ever heard the word covenant before? Do you know what it means? How about a word or two that mean the same as "covenant" but might be more familiar and easy to get our heads around?

(Scouts, are you awake over there!)

I made no *promise* to keep the message today from being a little interactive! Here's where *you* come in.

Scouts: On my honor, I will do my best to keep myself mentally awake. (!)

Boy Scout Oath or Promise.

On my honor, I will do my best. To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the **Scout** Law; To help other people at all times; To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.

Boy Scout Law A Scout is:

- Trustworthy,
- Loyal,
- Helpful,
- Friendly,
- Courteous,
- Kind,
- Obedient,
- Cheerful,
- Thrifty,

- Brave,
- Clean,
- and Reverent.

Boy Scout Motto

Be Prepared!

Boy Scout Slogan

Do a Good Turn Daily!

The Outdoor Code

I will do my best to -

- Be clean in my outdoor manners
- Be careful with fire
- Be considerate in the outdoors, and
- Be conservation minded.

VII. WHAT COVENANT MEANS—SPIRIT OF GOD

What this all boils down to—all this talk of promises and covenants and critters, is that God wants to be in relationship with us. With humans and animals. God doesn't want to live somewhere out there in Heaven, apart from us—some old man in the sky, with a long white beard.

God is the Spirit that lives all around us, between us, in the ground beneath our feet, in the wind that swirls around us, in the sky above. In the love between us. The Bible calls God, “The One in whom we live and move and have our being.”

That Spirit—the One who created the Universe, wants to be in our pack! Our troop. Wants to hang out with us. Sing around the campfire. Hike and camp in the woods. Figure out skills and how to create things together.

All these oaths, codes, rules, slogans and mottos are *all* about one thing: how to be in the world and in good and right relationship with God and with each other.

The most important rule is the “Golden Rule”—treat one another as you would like to be treated. That’s an easy way to remember what Covenant is all about.

Another great way to remember that God is right here with us and part of our Troop is whenever you see a Rainbow in the sky. That’s God’s badge—the proof of the Promise. The promise to always watch over us and care for us and protect the world from being wiped. The promise to gather in all the creature—that God loves all the little children and the animals of the world, and is in this with us. On the campout, in the boat, on the trail. God is with us. And God keeps God’s promises!

Closing Prayer:

God of our salvation, your bow in the clouds proclaims your covenant with every living creature. Teach us your paths and lead us in your truth, that by your Holy Spirit, we may remember our vows and be keepers of your trust with earth and its inhabitants. Amen.