

Covenant: God's Great Do-Over

Genesis 9:8-17

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I suspect that if you asked just about any group of Christ-followers whether they prefer the Old Testament or the New Testament, at least 80% would say the New Testament. And last night, the Green Wood congregation proved me right. If you ask them why, a few will say positive things about the New Testament - because the New Testament is about Jesus and I want to learn about him. The vast majority will say oof the following about the Old Testament:

- 1) God is violent and filled with judgment and fury.
- 2) It's confusing and often boring. It's too hard to keep track of everything.
- 3) There are too many wars and acts of divine retribution.
- 4) I don't understand the structure. The sequence of books and stories seems random and disjointed. Why does Job follow Esther and Psalms follow Job? Why are there two different creation stories and why repeat many of the same stories in Deuteronomy and Exodus?

With all the challenges of reading the Old Testament, we sometimes avoid it and just read the New. Yet, when we do we miss that the whole of the Bible, Old Testament and New, is built on one common theme - covenant. The Bible is one long story of God's grace-filled, covenantal relationship with humanity despite humanity's natural inclination toward sin and evil. In fact, the word "testament" means "covenant". The Bible is structured around the covenants that God makes with God's people - the old covenants and the new. So, for the next few weeks, we are going to look at the most important of those covenants, what they mean, and how they might be relevant to our lives today.

We'll get started with the rainbow covenant - a perfect jumping off point during this pride month! But, first a little context. Remember Adam and Eve? According to that story, God created the earth and everything in it, including humanity. God's vision was of humans living in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and with all of Creation. Of course, we know that Adam and Eve messed that up when they did the one thing they weren't supposed to do. They ate an apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That was the first human act of sin.

After centuries of hellfire and brimstone preachers and decades of televangelists, moderate and progressive Christians don't use the word sin much these days. After all, we don't feel like the terrible sinners they told us that we are. But in our discomfort and avoidance, we sometimes don't recognize that we really do all sin. Because sin isn't just murder or embezzlement or adultery, sin is whatever we do that comes between us and perfect harmony with God and creation. Adam and Eve's rebellion is important because it sets up the structure of the whole biblical narrative. God seeks to be in relationship with us, we rebel, we repent, God forgives, and all is well until we rebel again. The pattern is repeated over and over again in the Bible. And we are part of the pattern, too.

Now, for the great flood. After Adam and Eve leave the garden of Eden, humanity becomes increasingly evil. They murder each other, cheat each other, treat each other cruelly. Genesis 6:5 tells us, **5** The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on

the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. **6** The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. **7** So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them.”

Yes, God acts destructively, but it isn't out of anger or vindictiveness. God is sad. God's heart is troubled. God regrets creating these beings who seem unable to live in love. The only answer, it seems, is to start all over again. So, God sends the flood to wipe out all of creation - humans, animals, plants - every living thing except for Noah and those he took with him on the ark.

Yet, when it's over, God is again regretful. God grieves over the consequences of this decision. And God recognizes that humanity is unlikely to change - this flood will not change humanity's inclination toward evil. Rather God and how God is in relationship with creation must change. So, God makes a promise to never destroy creation again. God will work within this imperfect creation, with these imperfect humans, rather than judge and condemn them from outside of it. God chooses grace over punishment, love over power. And God places a rainbow in the sky to be a reminder of this change within God's self, a sign of God's unmerited grace.

This promise God makes is a covenant. It is not the kind of covenant which comes with conditions. Humanity doesn't have to make a promise to God in return. Rather, it is an unconditional, everlasting covenant - a covenant promise of God's faithfulness and grace.

In Genesis 9:12, God says about the rainbow, “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”. So, while this story has been around for thousands of years and may seem antiquated, its message is as true and relevant for us as it was for Noah and his family. We can take assurance that no matter how bad things might get in our lives or how bad the choices are that we make, God will be faithful to us. God will forgive and God will be waiting for us to return. And in fact, like God takes a do-over in destroying the world, God will always allow us a do-over, as well.

Which may cause us to call into question our thoughts of the Old Testament God as vengeful and violent. Commentator Cameron Howard points out, “the flood story reminds us that God has an “incarnational” side in the Old Testament, too; that is, God has always desired relationship with, and has been moved by the suffering of, humanity.” When we recognize that, we begin to see that the grace of God has been at work from very early on in the Judeo-Christian story.

In addition, this is a covenant for all people and for always. Professor and Episcopal priest Wil Gafney writes, “The covenant between God and all flesh is between God and every person for all time - between God and every girl, woman, boy, man, and intersex person, every lesbian, gay man, bisexual and transgender person, every atheist, agnostic and religious person, every Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Wiccan and pagan person, every person of ability and perceived limitations, every person of any nationality, ethnicity or racial construction or category, and even includes those who defy and explode categories.” God's grace and love are not in any way exclusive. We are all - and all means all - people included in this covenant of faithfulness. How fitting that the rainbow has become a sign of God's radically inclusive love.

This story of the great flood and God's rainbow covenant speaks to us about how we live in relationship with each other. We are made in God's image, made to relate to the world with the same grace and acceptance God offers us. And like God, we enter into covenants with each other. When two people marry in the church, we talk about the marriage covenant they are entering into with each other - a covenant which mirrors God's covenant with us. They promise they will strive to love unconditionally, remain faithful to that love, love despite each other's imperfections, and forgive each other when they make mistakes.

Similarly, as a congregation, when we are present as someone is baptized, we make a covenantal promise to them. We promise to walk with them through the joys and the challenges of human life, to help them grow in faithfulness and knowledge, and to be examples for them of discipleship in Jesus Christ.

Are there other covenantal relationships in your life? What are the spoken and unspoken promises that connect you to that other person? Are the promises unconditional or do you expect something in return?

Finally, I think the story of the flood and the covenant between God and all living beings speak to us about how we care for creation. God makes a promise never to flood the earth again. At the same time, climate change shows us that humanity is collectively destroying our planet every day. Thousands of species of animals and plants are at risk of extinction as the globe warms up. Changes in weather patterns are leading to an increase in floods, droughts, hurricanes, and other storms. Glaciers are melting, coral reefs are bleaching, plastics are filling our oceans and landfills. Our health and wholeness is inextricably connected to the health of all of God's creation, all those who share in God's rainbow covenant with us.

Ultimately, the story of Noah and the ark is a story of inclusion, of faithfulness, and of hope - a story built on the back of the first of God's covenant promises. Tune in next week for part two as God, who has committed to work with humans rather than destroy them, makes a covenant with Abraham that still impacts our world today.