The First Covenant

Genesis 8:20-9:17

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A New Start

When we left Noah and his family, they were rocking along in their Ark in a world deluged with water. They and the creatures with them were the sole survivors of a catastrophic flood that the Bible describes as God’s wrathful judgment on human evil.

As our text opens this morning, it has been over a year since the waters broke loose on the earth. But now the rains have long stopped, the floodwaters have receded, and finally the earth is dry. The great procession begins:

***So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.***

Creation has survived. Creaturely life has also survived, all of it. It is at this moment disembarking from the Ark. The world has been wiped clean. There is nothing left other than earth and water and air and sky and a new beginning.

It’s really worth pondering for a second.

Earth gets a second chance. A do over.

Humans get a second chance. A do over.

Have they learned anything? Will they be different?

Has God learned anything? What will God do different?

Worship, Gratitude & Grace

The text says that the first thing Noah does upon reaching dry land is to worship God in the manner that the ancients, and especially the priestly class in Israel, thought most appropriate:

***Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.***

We will have to assume that in the year on the ark some reproduction went on, giving us some animals and birds to spare for sacrifice.

But the bigger implication here is just Noah’s gratitude. Noah has his feet on dry ground for the first time in a year. God has spared him and his loved ones. God has spared humanity and the other creatures. Noah is grateful. We live! God has spared us!

Gratitude is at the core of all worship, of this I am convinced.

***Meister Eckhart wrote: “If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough.”***

And this from ***Maya Angelou: “Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer.”***

On this first day of the rest of creation, Noah needs no coaching in gratitude. He offers his gratitude. And God responds:

***I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.***

To humanity’s gratitude, God offers the promise of grace.

No more cursing of the ground. No more mass destruction, at least not from God’s hands. No more disruptions from God of the seasons upon which human and creaturely life depends.

This grace is NOT based on divine optimism about human nature. God acknowledges that “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” But God has simply decided that in response to the brokenness of humanity God will offer grace. God will not crumple up humanity again. God will not destroy us again. God will bear with us. God will sustain us. This is the promise of grace.

Many of us here – I daresay most of us who have lived a while – can attest to God’s grace in our lives even when we have demonstrated the sinful inclinations of our own hearts.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found

Was blind but now I see.

Grace Taking Form as Covenant

In many churches, that would be about it. That’s the Gospel message that would be presented. Humans are sinners, saved by God’s grace – with grace simply meaning God’s forgiving acceptance.

But that is a truncated Gospel. And it is certainly not what happens after the Flood. The story here is not just a story of forgiven and accepted sinners. The message here is that ***God has a plan for helping forgiven sinners live – and that plan is covenant.***

So we read on, into chapter 9:

***God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth…every moving thing that lives shall be food for you…I give you everything.***

The original creation mandate/blessing is renewed: humans are blessed and commanded to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth.

But they also are given new instructions as to what God’s ground rules are for them.

The first is what they are allowed to eat: rather than only fruits and veggies, as in Genesis 1, now they can kill and eat animals.

This also means that the relationship between animals and humans will now take on a fearful quality.

We are reminded that life on the other side of the Flood is not renewed paradise. There’s no going back there. That original harmony between humans and animals is broken.

And now some more rules:

***You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.***

We saw in the Cain and Abel story that God there viewed the essence or life of the person as being found in his blood; thus Abel’s blood cried out from the ground after he was murdered by Cain.

We now see that God looks that way on the animals too. They have value, they have life, they have a kind of sacredness. You can eat them, but not their blood. It’s their life. It’s off limits for you. And this brings up another kind of covenantal boundary line for humans:

***For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image, God made humankind.***

The covenant God is making with human beings now has these stipulations:

***--You are allowed to kill and eat animals***

***--You are not allowed to consume their blood***

***--You must not kill another human being***

***--There must be a reckoning for the taking of a human life***

***--Human beings must take care of making that reckoning; God will not do it for us***

***--That reckoning must be equivalent – life for life.***

Do you see what we have here? The beginnings of a very basic moral code for primitive sinful humanity. Life must be respected. Human beings are made in God’s image and have God’s protection. If you shed another person’s blood you have entered a zone that you are not permitted to enter, and you must be punished.

But God will not (usually) intervene to make that punishment happen. Humans must set up mechanisms for judging such cases and making a just reckoning. In a period before law courts, before jails, before all of that, there was only one way to make such a reckoning: life for life punishment. Some have read this passage as forever mandating the death penalty for every form of killing. But we don’t have to read it that rigidly, and in light of the mercy we see in Jesus Christ many of us are not fans of the death penalty.

But don’t miss the big picture. God is gracious. In sparing humanity, God has been gracious. In deciding to bear with humanity, God is being gracious.

***But God’s grace is experienced not just in forgiveness, not just in bearing with us, but also in giving us morality and law.***

We need to know not just *that* God still loves and accepts us. We also need to know *how* God wants us to live. That’s part of God’s grace too. Grace is not just forgiveness.

***Grace is guidance for living from the Creator who is the only one who really knows the best way for human beings to live.***

It is not a small thing that at the very beginning of divine law is a reminder of the sacred worth of the human being – a reminder that there is a divine boundary around every person that says “do not murder.” And the implications trickle down from there: not just don’t murder, but don’t assault. Don’t rape. Don’t dehumanize. Don’t degrade. Don’t violate. Do treat each person as the sacred human being God has made them to be.

God Binds Himself to Covenant Promise

Notice that as chapter 9 of Genesis continues, God binds himself to moral boundaries as well. There is no one who can command God so God commands himself. God binds himself with promises:

***Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood.***

And:

***I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. When the rainbow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.***

So now we have a covenant between God, humanity, and all creatures. ***The Jewish tradition calls this the Noachide Covenant,*** or Covenant with Noah. It is the first covenant in the entire Bible. It establishes a precedent that will repeat through successive covenants over many centuries: with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses, with David and his descendants, and finally through Jesus with the church.

This covenant sets the pattern for others in how it is structured. God binds himself to behave in certain ways toward humanity, creatures, or Israel. God invites a covenant partner to enter into covenant and likewise to behave in certain ways.

In this covenant, God’s sacred promise is narrowly not to send another world-defacing flood. But more broadly it is a covenant to never again give up on us, never again let us face the full consequences of our sin, but to act in grace toward us. And the us here is all creatures. God is making a promise to all creatures, and not just us. ***This text teaches us that God is in covenant with the entire created order, and all creatures.*** That ought to elevate them in our eyes! And it ought to elevate our treatment of the creation and its creatures!

And for our part, our covenant promise is to respect life. To not kill. To hold accountable those who do kill. This must be the most basic moral law because it is the one we are given in the Noachide Covenant. Everything else follows from this. Even the later command to love our neighbor as ourselves is an implication -- it’s like taking the command not to kill and blowing it up to its most beautiful expression – not just *don’t* kill, but *do* love!

Stepping Back and Looking at the Big Picture

Let me close in this way.

Our study in Genesis began with the perfection of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve frolicking in a garden paradise, plenty of beauty, plenty of great food, God hanging out with them during Evening Breeze time, and only one rule.

Our study in Genesis ends with a new innovation suitable for a fallen world: covenant. Now God must specify the terms of right relationship between us and him, and us and each other, because we no longer are able to get there “naturally.” What is natural to us is to do the wrong thing.

Covenant has its own loveliness. We see it in a wedding. I promise to treat you this way, you promise to treat me that way, and we covenant to do this together for the rest of our lives, and we invite all these lovely well-dressed people to witness this.

Ah, weddings. Beautiful. But not innocent. The very need for a covenant, the very need to make promises follows from a no longer perfect world. If we were not sinful we would not need to make covenants. If we did not easily stray from the right we would not need to be reminded of what the right is. If we did not deny on a bad day that we ever made such promises we would not need to make them in public. Covenants bind sinful human beings. We need them!

And so what is a church? A community of sinful human beings, saved by God’s grace in Jesus Christ, who have decided to covenant together with each other and with God to be followers of Jesus. If we were perfect, we wouldn’t need a covenant. If we were perfect, we wouldn’t need each other. And if we were perfect, we wouldn’t need God to send his Son to save us.

But we’re not perfect. We do need Jesus. We do need covenant. And we do need each other. And so God provides all three, to those who will say yes. Thanks be to God.