

“A Covenant Promise”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
First Sunday of Lent – February 18, 2018

**Genesis 9: 8-17**

We don't hear the word "covenant" a lot in our modern world. We will use the phrase "the covenant of marriage" when talking about a wedding between two people. We will see the word "covenant" in the titles of companies or churches. In fact, the other main occasion I thought of that I hear the word "covenant" is related to home owners' associations. And then the word doesn't inspire very positive feelings! How many times have we heard that we can't make a change to our home or our property because "it doesn't adhere to the covenants of the neighborhood"? There's been more than one occasion that I would like to throw the word covenant back in the face of our homeowners' association!

We most often associate the word covenant with the Bible and our faith. If you look in your Bible, it's not uncommon for the New Testament to be called "The New Covenant of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." We are very familiar with covenant in the Old Testament scriptures, for it is in covenants that God promises to be Israel's God throughout their lives. At its heart, a covenant is a promise or agreement between two or more people. It is a promise grounded in trust, faith, and hope.

Today's scripture is the first of these covenants which God makes with his chosen people. There will be future covenants between God and his children, but this is the first time God says to one of them, "This is my covenant with you." God chose one man and his family to save the world from his destruction. God knew that Noah was faithful, and would carry out God's instructions regarding the building and supplying of the ark. There is no question that this narrative depicts God's frustration with his people, and how God will go to great lengths, even destructive ones, to bring them back in line. But in the end, God offers hope through Noah and his family, and that hope is where our reading picks up this morning.

The flood has subsided. The ark has reached dry land. The animals have been let out to roam free and repopulate the earth. Noah, his wife, sons and daughters-in-law are now resting after an eventful forty days and nights. The storm has passed, and now God has something to say to them.

"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (9:9-11).

It is with Noah that God begins a covenant. In this covenant, there is nothing for Noah to do. It is a promise which God makes alone, a contract which is of God's own initiative. "As for me, I am establishing . . ." Noah doesn't have a say in this

covenant, but neither is he called to fulfill it with any further acts of faith or promises of his own. This promise of God comes as a result of the flood, and is an expression of hope which the earth had not had forty days earlier. As one commentator notes: "The covenant is all God's doing, an act of amazing graciousness, the very self-giving God" (*Texts for Preaching*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 1993: 192).

And in case the Lord has a memory lapse and forgets this contract which he has made with Noah, there will be a sign to remind God. "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh" (9:13-15).

That bow is more than the rainbow which we normally associate with this passage. It also refers to the bow of a bow and arrow, the weapons of a warrior who fights in battles and wars. The violence which comes from a bow will no longer touch the earth and the creatures who reside in it. For every time we see the bow in the clouds, we are reminded that God's bow is hung on the wall, never to cause the same destruction which was caused in the flood. "The bow is an invitation to 'basic trust,' for the world as God's creation is an utterly safe place" (*Texts for Preaching*, 194).

What does this story tell us about God and God's very nature? What does this covenant with Noah reveal to us about God's wishes for us as his human creatures? How are we called to respond to this covenant promise of God?

David Lose writes: *What is surprising about the story of Noah and the flood is NOT that God despaired over humanity and decided to eradicate us from the earth . . . Nor is it surprising that God relents from eradicating everyone by saving righteous Noah and his family, as well as male and female representatives of every living thing upon the earth . . . What is surprising about this story is the detail presented in today's reading. After first inflicting this cataclysm of judgment and then saving representatives of humanity and all living things, God makes a promise in these verses never again to destroy the earth and all its inhabitants in this way . . .*

*Think about it. In the scene depicted in today's reading, God binds God's self to humanity, and indeed to all the world, in a new and different way. God is no longer only the creator; God is now also the protector, committed to refrain from punishing humanity or destroying the world . . . Further, by binding God's self to the fate of humanity, God becomes inherently invested in the fate of humanity and in this way keenly vulnerable, even exposed.*

*Along with power, justice, patience and love, the ancient Hebrews also perceived that God was inherently self-giving, willing to enter into a relationship that put limits on even God's prerogatives. This is, of course, the way it is with all genuine relationships. Parents bound in love to their children make all kinds of sacrifices that would have been difficult to imagine prior to having children. What is novel is applying such a conception to the Divine. But if we are to take seriously the Biblical covenants – established here with Noah and later with Abraham, David, and through baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection with all who call upon God's*

*name - then we must recognize that God has indeed entered into a genuine relationship with humanity and is therefore now subject to the hope and disappointment, joy and grief that attend all relationships.*

*Here is the significance of this passage for the beginning of Lent. The self-limitation and willingness to sacrifice divine freedom that this passage describes reach their climax in the passion of Jesus Christ, for which Lent prepares us. Lent, in this sense, is a journey to the other side of God, a venture not to the familiar terrain of God's omnipotence and omniscience but instead into the weakness and vulnerability of the cross, where we confess God in Jesus consummated the relationship with humanity most fully by embracing all of our experience, even death*

*(David Lose, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 27-31).*

“God has indeed entered into a genuine relationship with humanity and is therefore now subject to the hope and disappointment, joy and grief that attend all relationships.”

God is hopeful with us when we can dream together about a new reality and life in faith. God is disappointed in us and with us when we continue to show little respect for human life in human-created tragedies like Parkland, Florida, this week. God is joyful with us when we see in our daily lives the presence of God's love in relationships, circumstances, and the created world. God grieves with us when we suffer loss and pain and heartbreak.

The covenant promise God made with Noah was one of genuine relationship with humanity. It was a promise to be vulnerable with us, to come to us and truly be present with us, to never inflict the devastation of the flood upon us again. The covenant promise God made with Noah is embodied in Emmanuel, God with Us, Jesus Christ our Lord.

As God's children, just because God made this covenant promise without any condition upon humanity does not mean we are off the hook. This covenant is a free gift of grace, a blessing which should instill in us a deep desire to live lives of gratitude and faith. How do we respond to this covenant promise? By showing the same deep love of humanity and creation that God showed in the covenant with Noah. As David Lose says, “It is a long journey from our usual preoccupation with self and our related tendency to view others in relation to how they may meet our needs, to viewing them instead as those who deserve our respect and support because God has called them worthwhile. It may be a long journey - one that begins in Lent, passes through the passion and the cross, and ends up somewhere on this side of the resurrection - but it is a journey worth taking, and today is a good day to get walking” (ibid, 31).

Thanks be to God for God's covenant promise to us and to this world. Amen.