

“I Will Remember My Covenant”

Salado UMC—18 February 2018

Lent 1

Preaching Text: Genesis 9:8-17—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

“The only thing that stops God from sending another flood is that the first one was useless” Nicholas Chamfort (1741—1794).

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Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday. Lent ends on Holy Saturday. The word “Lent” comes from an Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means “spring.” The season is a preparation for celebrating Easter. Historically, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts. A bit later it became a time for penance by all Christians. Lent’s First Sunday describes Jesus’ temptation by Satan; and the Sixth Sunday (*Passion/Palm Sunday*), Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his subsequent passion and death. Because Sundays are always “little Easters,” we can temper the penitential spirit of Lent with joyful expectation of the Resurrection on these Sabbaths.

We can also understand Lent as the length to which God will go to deliver on God’s promise made in scripture to Israel. God said: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians” (Exodus 6:7). This is, no doubt, the fullest expression of God’s covenant promise. Yet, there are earlier echoes of it in God’s conversations with patriarchs/matriarchs. We all remember from our Sunday School lessons that God made covenant promises with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel. Our lesson today is one of the earliest vestiges of God’s covenantal promise in our Bible. Hear our morning lesson:

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 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. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

12 God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 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. 16 When the bow 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.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth” (Genesis 9:8-17—NRSV).

This story follows being in close and floating quarters with two of every kind of animal. It suggests God’s notice of all creation. The text says plainly, “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. I establish my covenant with you" (Genesis 9:9-11a). Commenting on this idea of the solidarity between humanity and the animal world Robert Alter wrote:

God's first postdiluvian speech to Noah affirms man's solidarity with the rest of the animal kingdom—the covenant He goes on to spell out, emphatically, with all flesh, not just with humankind—but also modifies the arrangement stipulated in the Creation story. Vegetarian man of the Garden is now allowed a carnivore's diet (this might conceivably be intended as an outlet for his violent impulses). And in consonance with that change, man does not merely rule over the animal kingdom but inspires it with fear.

The promise to people, in this case represented by Noah, is also a reminder to God. The bow in the clouds reminds God of the covenant God has made with the people, it is not explicitly given to remind people of the covenant God has made with them. We might say that as we see God's rainbow in the sky we are reminded that the rainbow is reminding God of God's covenant with us. Thus, though it is a sign to us of God's promise, originally, it was a reminder to Almighty God of God's promise to never destroy the earth again by water. The text clearly says, "When the bow 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" (Genesis 9:16).

Last of all, at least last for us this morning, is the remarkable fact about the nature of the God we worship. This is a God who seems to have a change of mind/heart with regard to the human being that the Creator has created. If you remember, what has pushed this God to the brink with creation in its human form and indicated in the Genesis story: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Thus, as a way to stop the violence, God decided to end the experiment of Creation.

But after the flood, God has second thoughts, so it seems, about the absolute destruction of all that God created. This is where God's new promise comes into play. God makes a covenant with Noah. It is as if the flood experience has brought God and God's people represented by Noah closer together. God will again and again intercede on humanity's behalf. This is an absolutely new idea in the history of religions. Prior to the flood, all ancient people conceived of gods as heartless and whimsically powerful. The gods only concern was for their good pleasure. Noah's God of the Genesis story is a different kind of God altogether. They called this God Yahweh.

Alan Jones wrote of this new conception of the Hebrew deity:

In the mystical tradition of Judaism, it was believed that the Shekinah, which represented God's gracious and over-arching presence in the world, suffered a series of self-humiliations by which the history of the world developed. God 'suffered' in creating the world, choosing the patriarchs, making the various covenants, enduring the slavery and the exodus from Egypt, and going with his people into exile. The Almighty thus will 'humiliate' himself until the end of the world.

Lent, I want to suggest, is yet another stage or representation of this God we meet in the form of our Bible. The same God which put a rainbow in the sky as a reminder to never again destroy the earth by water, is the same God who erects a cross to remind us of a divine love that will never let us go. I

wonder, could the cross be a reminder to God about his love for us as the rainbow reminded God never to destroy the earth by water again? At any rate, this love is the promise of God. It is a covenant that gives us a promise that in the midst of rain clouds that there is a rainbow lurking in the background.

Natalie Sleeth worded these covenant words in her hymn, “[The] Hymn of Promise:”

**In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise; butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**There’s a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
there’s a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

This Lent, remember the promise of God. Lent is about Jesus Christ, but it is also about the God who has made Christ become flesh and dwell among us. From the first verse of our scripture which reads, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) to its very last verse that reads, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints Amen” (Revelation 22:21), know that God is with you. And if you don’t know scripture well, or if you are prone to forget the wonder of God, repeat these words slowly and deliberately, for they summarize the totality of our God: “God is great, God is good” Amen!

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