

“Implications of the First Covenant”

Genesis 9:8–17

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We often contrast the New Covenant we experience with God in Christ, made possible through events we remember each year in Lent, with the Old Covenant the children of Israel experience with God, as described in the book of Exodus. The New Covenant is based on grace, we say, while the Old Covenant is based on law. The New Covenant is formed when Jesus dies and is raised while the Old Covenant is established when Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai. We have heard all of this from pulpits and in Bible studies, and there is a certain logic to it, but there are also two significant problems.

First, every covenant is shaped by grace. The Israelites are delivered from bondage in Egypt by God long before they are told to follow commandments. It is an act of pure grace. Their relationship with God involves certain obligations, as does our relationship with God in the context of grace — faith without works is dead, says James 2:17. But it begins and ends with grace.

Second, the covenant God establishes with Israel on Mount Sinai is not the only covenant God establishes in the Hebrew Bible. It’s not even the first. The first is the covenant we have read about today in Genesis 9, the story about what God does after the flood. God establishes a covenant not just with men and women but with all living creatures. It is a fascinating narrative with implications for us.

In fact, all of the ancient covenants have something to say to us, and since they all show up in Lent in this cycle of the lectionary readings, I thought we might benefit from examining each in relationship to the New Covenant, beginning today with the very first covenant God establishes with all creation.

We know the story well. It is one of the most familiar and beloved in scripture, one we share with children, but one with complications.

There are many ancient tales about a flood with similarities and dissimilarities to the biblical narrative. It seems clear that there was a flood, though it was interpreted in different ways. And there are different ways of viewing the biblical story which is one complication for us. Do we view this as a literal, historical tale, which is difficult to do not just because of how big the ark would have to be but because the number of animals varies in the reading? Or do we view this as a mythic narrative, a story told to make sense of reality? This is one challenge.

The other challenge is created by all that surrounds our reading. Just before God makes a covenant with all living creatures, God destroys almost every living thing. The flood doesn't just happen, God makes it happen because the people have been so wicked. It is punishment that inflicts damage not just on the offenders but on other innocent species. This raises theological questions, and if this is not bad enough, just after the covenant, we have a story which includes the curse of Canaan which has been used to support slavery for centuries. We might be tempted to follow Thomas Jefferson and cut some of these stories out of our Bible, which would be ironic, given his views on slavery.

Yet, in between these two problematic tales is a wonderful story worth retaining. God promises never to destroy the earth again, at least not through floods of water (though recent weather patterns might raise some questions about this), and God places a bow in the clouds as a sign of this promise. And God makes a covenant not just with Noah and the other human survivors but with every living creature — birds, domestic animals, every animal that comes off the ark. This means that God seeks out a personal relationship not just with people but with all of creation. This means that God extends grace to all creation.

No matter how we view this story, it provides a critical word for our time, a needed corrective for our anthropocentric view of life. We tend to think it's all about us, this world is all for us. We even think we have scripture to back us up — the narrative of Genesis 1 wherein we are created last and are given dominion. But dominion is more about responsibility to care for the earth with God than the right to use and abuse it with impunity. And the fact that we are created last can be interpreted in different ways.

In his book *Messengers of God* Elie Wiesel refers to two rabbinic traditions as to why man and woman are created last (p. 10). One view points to the significance of humanity. When a king invites a guest, he first prepares a palace for him and then asks him to come. Man and woman are creation's guests of honor. Another view, however, suggests that man and woman are created last to keep them from taking themselves too seriously, from growing vain and arrogant. Man and woman could be asked, "What are you boasting about? Even mosquitoes preceded you in the order of creation!"

It is a point well taken. The order of creation can be interpreted in different ways. And there is no evidence that the world is created just for humans. In fact, today's reading from Genesis 9 makes it clear that all of creation matters to God. A recognition of this truth seems to call for change or what we call repentance in the church.

In the reading from Mark 1, after Jesus has been baptized and then tempted in the wilderness, he begins his ministry of teaching and preaching, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Thus, he launches his work with proclamation of the good news and the first thing people need to do is repent, turn away from former ways so that they can turn to his.

Among the many things from which we need to repent, especially in the West, is our utter lack of humility with regard to the created world and thus our systematic abuse of the planet and all the creatures on it. God may have promised not to destroy the world again, but this does mean we won't do it one way or another — if not through nuclear holocaust, through climate change and other abusive behavior.

I had a conversation with a family member in which he pointed out how many shifts in weather and atmosphere the earth has experienced in its history, picking up on an argument some have used to minimize the significance of climate change. "That is true," I replied, "And during many of those shifts, entire species have disappeared from the earth. If we don't change our course, maybe it will be the humans who become extinct this time. If it is, many other species will rejoice!"

Part of what this hypothetical future points to is that how we treat the rest of creation not only affects other forms of life, very often it

affects our lives, because all of life is interconnected. In his book *The Unsettling of America* Wendell Berry says that we have all but given up the understanding that we and the land create one another, depend on one another, are part of one another (p. 22). The land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of the land, such that all who are living here, says Berry, human and plant and animal, are part of one another. Berry says that our culture must be responsive to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other, and so neither can be better than the other, neither can flourish without the other.

I have shared with some of you before a story which documents the interconnected nature of life (*Christian Ethics: A Case Study Method Approach*, pp. 129-143). Leaders in Arizona were thinking about building a new dam. There were benefits, but at risk was the survival of the Sonoran desert snake, at first glance for many people, no risk at all. Who needs another snake in the world?! Right? Well, it's hard to say, not just because I used to have a couple of pet snakes... but because most dilemmas are more complex than they appear.

There were many arguments against the dam, but regarding the snake, one environmentalist pointed to the case of the Rosy Periwinkle, an inconspicuous tropical flower that happened to provide a drug used in the treatment of childhood leukemia and Hodgkin's Disease. Who would have thought that a flower could mean life for people? Who knows the value of the Sonoran desert snake for humanity, not to mention its intrinsic value in an ecosystem ordered by God? While I am the first to question the purpose of some parts of creation — if not snakes certainly mosquitoes and ragweed — I have come to realize that we are much more closely linked to the world around us than we think.

It may be that COVID-19 provides another example of the interconnectedness of all life. We realize now how interconnected all people are. How we behave, how seriously we take the virus and follow safety guidelines affects everyone around us. What people living on the other side of the world do affects us. But it is also possible that this pandemic's beginning points to our relationship to other forms of life. Scientists have not determined where the virus originated. Some think it may have come from a research lab in China, but very few scientists

think this. The dominant theory is that it came from bats and was transferred from a bat through a domestic animal to a person.

This might cause some to question the existence of bats, but as one bat specialist, a chiropterologist, has noted, the real problem is that human beings have invaded the ecosystems of other species without regard to those species' wellbeing or our own. We assume it's all for us anyway, who cares if other species are harmed, and we can handle any harm we incur... Well, so far 2.4 million people worldwide have died from this virus, nearly a half million in this nation, over 10,000 in North Carolina, over 500 in our county, including people we knew and loved. Amidst all of the tragic details of this pandemic is the potential link to another lifeform we have failed to respect, as always at our own peril.

Of course, the virus itself is a lifeform, a microorganism like many we host in our bodies. In a recent article in *The Christian Century* (February 10, 2021, p. 37) Isaac S. Villegas notes that about 57% of the cells in a human body belong to other species – bacteria, viruses, fungi, archaea... Each of us is our own microbiome, not one simple life form.

So, what is the message for us in all of this? What are the implications of the first covenant and what does any of this have to do with Lent, following Jesus on the way to the cross? It is a call to repentance in regard to our arrogance as human beings. It is a call to humility, to consider the needs of others, even other parts of creation, before we consider our own. It is a call to renewal in our commitment to care for the earth with God. And all these things — repentance, humility, renewal, and commitment — are appropriate for this season.

The devil is the details, though, and hopefully God too, which is to say the challenge comes when we start considering specific things we might do like reduce our carbon footprint, recycle more, volunteer at an animal shelter, advocate for environmental concerns, plant trees.

An oncologist in another church I served did the latter. He owned a farm on which he grew tobacco for years. His wife finally convinced him this was not appropriate for an oncologist, and once his conscience was stirred, he went all out with a replacement crop. He developed a tree farm that give back to the planet and won all sorts of awards.

Not everyone has a farm, but there are things we can all do. Some actions create tension — between economic concerns and environmental ones, between what we think is best for people and what is best for other parts of creation. I am not suggesting that the best way forward is simple and obvious. But many decisions are shortsighted. In the long run, our best interests are almost always linked to the best interests of the created world. Our short-term benefit may curse our children and grandchildren. Is this really the legacy we want to leave?

Whatever ways we might choose to act, it begins with a basic act of faith suited to this season — repentance, a change of heart and way of being, a realization of our true place in universe — highly valued, loved, but just one beloved part of an entire world loved by its Creator.