

Rev. Lynne Ogren                      Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
February 21, 2021              1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year B              Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Show us your ways, O Lord, and lead us in your truth. Amen

This year, the season of Lent features a series of covenant stories in our Old Testament readings. The ongoing story of the Bible is the developing relationship between God and humanity, especially as both God and human beings struggle to stay in that relationship.

Every covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures contains a promise and a sign of that promise—much like the promises and rings exchanged in our wedding ceremonies.

When we look at our wedding bands, we are meant to remember the promises we made to our spouse and that our spouse made to us. The sign of each biblical covenant is meant to remember God's promises.

The interesting thing about the covenants in the Bible is that God always initiates the covenant. God comes to humanity and make promises. Sometimes we are asked to respond to those promises, but even when we don't live up to our side of the covenant God never severs the relationship. God finds a new way to renew and mend our relationship.

This is especially true in our first covenant story today, found at the end of the epic story of the Flood. Let's remember how we got there in the first place.

The season of Lent began this week with Ash Wednesday. I met with the BLAST kids that day and we read through the second Creation story in Genesis, chapters 2 and 3. In that version, God creates the human being from clay, from the soil or the dust of the earth.

The word human comes from the Latin word *humus* which we still refer to today as the most fertile layer of soil. The name Adam is a play off the Hebrew word, *adamah*, which means earth. The human being is a creature of the earth.

On Ash Wednesday, when we are marked with ash, we hear God's words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In part, we are meant to remember that we are human, mortal, that we are not God. But as we move into our first covenant story today, these words also remind us that we are as much a part of Creation as every plant that grows and every animal that walks, swims, crawls, or flies.

Sin is a force that drives us to see ourselves as the center of the universe. Sin sets us apart from other people and from the created world, so that we see ourselves as more important than the resources we depend on for food, clothing, shelter and personal comfort.

As human beings, our abilities to reason and plan and learn do set us apart from other animals, but we must always remember that we are as much a member of God's created order as the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and every animal and creeping thing of the ground.

In the first generations after the dawn of Creation, humanity's sense self-importance and drive to self-indulgence grieved God so deeply that God decided to start over. The story of the Flood is a kind of unraveling of the creation that God had so lovingly knit together.

As the clouds gathered, the light of the sun and the moon God had created to govern the day and the night was extinguished. As the rain fell and the water rose up, the boundaries God set between the land and the sea were erased. And as all plants and animals and the remaining human beings drowned in the flood, the earth once again became a formless void.

And then, God breathed upon the waters, which is another way of saying God's Spirit moved over the waters as it did in the beginning, and the seas moved back into place, the dry land appeared once again, and life was renewed.

After the animals and Noah left the ark, God made this first covenant—a one-way covenant. God is the only one who makes a promise and God is the only one expected to keep it. It is a promise not only for Noah and the human family who will follow, but a promise for all creation that God will never again destroy what God has made.

We like to think of God as unchanging, but in this covenant, God seems to repent from this act of destruction. God decides not to be a vengeful, angry God. In this moment God reaffirms the attitude of being a creating God, creating for goodness and life.

The sign that accompanies this covenant with creation is God's bow that God set in the clouds. We recognize this sign as a rainbow, that arc of color that appears in the sky only when the light shines through the clouds in just the right way. But the Bible only says that God hung up his bow, his weapon, and that this sign was not for humanity as much as it was so that God would remember—remember the promise never to curse the earth again because of humanity's evil tendencies.

God does not ask anything of human beings in this covenant. But, what might it mean for us as people who belong to God and are created in the image of God to live within this promise God has made?

Are you one who seeks refreshment and renewal by being outside and engaging with creation? "Research shows that bacteria naturally found in soil...activates a group of neurons that produces the brain chemical serotonin, which is key for regulating mood and contributes to better emotional stability and a better social life, not to mention decreased risk of cardiovascular disease. [These bacteria are also said to] contribute to increased productivity and less anxiety."<sup>1</sup>

Every farmer and backyard gardener will tell you that they already know all that! I remember growing up in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains and the smells of the forest that came from the soil and the trees brought a kind of calm to my soul.

I have a friend who taught at a small Lutheran college in Western Washington for many years in the field of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry. They had a preschool on their campus and they incorporated a rooftop garden as part of the children's learning space. My friend is convinced that God's good creation is the best classroom for children to grow as healthy, happy human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.govexec.com/management/2013/06/health-benefits-working-your-hands/64937/>

Today we are reminded of God's commitment to protecting and preserving the world God so loves—the earth and the skies, the land and the seas, the forests and the deserts, and every creature that swims, crawls, slithers, gallops, leaps, and flies.

That includes the human creature who thinks and wonders and explores and has been tasked with caring for all creation, a task given in the first Creation account in Genesis 1.

As the rainbow serves as a sign for God to remember the promise made after the Flood, may it also serve as a sign for us to remember our role in serving and loving the world, so that all people and all creatures would thrive.

Thanks be to God. Amen