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February 18, 2018
Lent 1: Me & You & the Creatures Too (Genesis 9:8-17)

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. It is the liturgical season of the church that is set aside as a time of preparing for Easter. In the early church this season of Lent was used to prepare individuals to receive the sacrament of baptism on Easter morning. Now, we often view these forty days as space for self-examination and reflection to discern areas of our lives in need of Christ's healing, forgiveness, and restoration.

Sometimes within this context we consider letting go of something for the next 40 days, or a way to include fasting, or at least fasting from a particular item or food as a means to draw us deeper into prayerful reflection. Lent creates the space, and sets the rhythm of time to slow down, to breathe deeply, to take a soul inventory, to become reoriented to the table at the last supper, the cross of Good Friday, and the empty tomb on glorious Easter. Each and every year we join Jesus and his disciples on this journey - a journey that leads inward of reflection, and onward as we too anticipate the coming events.

During this particular season of Lent within our times of corporate worship we will be exploring the theme of "Between Me & You". This theme, which is derived from the lectionary texts for year B, is multifaceted. "It refers to the relationship between us and God; it also refers to the relationship between people, and the relationship between people and the rest of creation."ⁱ As we explore this theme we will be looking at various covenants found within the Old and New Testaments. "The covenants that God makes with the people of God provide hints at the nature of the relationship intended between God and creation, as well as guidelines for how we are to relate to God and to one another."ⁱⁱ

“In the ancient Near East, covenants were legal documents, cementing a relationship of mutual obligation, usually between a greater power and a lesser power. For example, a conquering kingdom might covenant not to destroy a losing kingdom, as long as the losers promised to fight against the conqueror’s enemies and to support the conqueror with troops and supplies. The obligations are indeed reciprocal, but the power dynamics are not often equal.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We are familiar with the spirit of covenants as we understand them to be agreements made between two parties. Each party agrees to certain obligations and stipulations and then there is a coming together and a sealing of the covenant. We might experience this within our vocational lives with a year to year contract or covenant. Or for those whose journey includes marriage, another form of a covenant. Working in residence life at Eastern Mennonite University I would create covenants with students about our hopes, expectations, and shared vision for communal living. Here at Waterford we have a covenant together that speaks of our commitment to one another. We are reminded of this covenant when new members join the church, as well as in every baby dedication as we commit ourselves to the active care and nurture of the child being dedicated. So in various arenas of our lives inside and outside of church we experience this process of coming together, arriving at a shared decision, and entering a covenant with another party.

Our understandings of covenants are rooted in our biblical narrative which describes the covenants that God made with God’s people. Sometimes the covenants are with a family household, others times with the entire expansion of God people, and others like today’s are connected with all of creation.

During the first three Sundays of Lent we will be looking at three of the familiar Old Testament Covenants – Covenant with Noah and all of creation, Covenant with Abraham, and

covenant with Israel at Sinai. “While each covenant is distinct from the others, taken together they testify to God’s ongoing desire to be in relationship with humanity.”^{iv}

Today’s text in Genesis chapter nine comes toward the end of the story of Noah and his family. As one author highlights:

The story of Noah and the flood is one of those biblical narratives that we are so familiar with we think we know the whole story. In fact, what we tend to think of as the story is one of two interpretations that are common in our culture. The most common interpretation is very much a children's story of animals and rainbows. This is a story about God's love for animals, about remembering God's love each time we see a rainbow, even about the bright side of every storm. The second common interpretation is a story that is most definitely not for children. In this interpretation, God is so angered by human rebellion that God floods the whole earth, wiping out nearly everything in a fit of divine rage. This is a story about a God whom you'd be crazy to want to have anything to do with, a God of wrath who is ready and willing to strike down sinners. Neither of these stories is the whole story.^v

So this leads us to ask then, what is the story of Noah about? As we enter Lent, what is the word for us today as we consider the covenant that God made with Noah and with all of creation?

Our text today actually picks up the story after significant action has already taken place. If we jumped back to chapter six verse eleven we would receive a significant piece of the puzzle. There we read – “now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.” The story continues to describe the building of an ark, the collecting of various animals, and the rain coming for 40 days and 40 nights. Or at least this is the story that we learned in elementary school or vacation bible school! However, digging into God’s assessment in verse eleven we begin to realize that God’s perspective is that “The earth had already been destroyed in God’s

sight. All flesh had destroyed life on the earth. So God determines to carry out the destruction which all flesh had generated.”^{vi}

Now when this story is told to children we have this beautiful picture of an ark, perhaps like one that we have out back for our children to play on. The animals look happy and healthy, and then rain begins to come, nice gentle rain... the kind you want to sit on your front porch and watch as it rolls across the prairie. But turn with me to chapter seven, verse eleven. There we read, “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, on the seventeenth day of the second month – on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.” Now we remember the story of creation found in Genesis chapter one. There we are told that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” There was water chaos. On the second day “God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water. So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so.”

While we have created this cozy little picture of the Flood and the ark, in all seriousness the text describes it in more catastrophic terms. Suddenly the waters that had been held above were suddenly released to the earth, removing the separation from the water above and the water below. “Everything went back to the water chaos before God’s speaking and acting (in Genesis 1:2).”^{vii} So within the story of the Flood we find another story of creation, in fact a story of God being a re-creating God. Once again the world was in chaos as a result of the human heart and inclinations toward violence, greed, deception, and sin. The world was being destroyed and God brought a halt to the chaos and became a God of re-creating. So this story is not just a story about God’s love of Noah and animals. Nor should it be reduced to a depiction of God’s judgment that

reveals God's anger and wrath. Perhaps the "truer story is that God has a myriad of ways of calling us back to the harmony that God intended for us."^{viii}

So now we reach our text in chapter nine where the covenant with Noah is described. "The first thing to notice about God's covenant with Noah is that it is not, in fact, with Noah alone, nor with only his family, but rather with "every living creature" (Genesis 9:10), "all flesh" (v. 16). God commits God's self not just to humanity, but to all of creation. The second extraordinary detail about this covenant is that ...all of the obligations rest with God. As (one author) points out, God reaches out to the world, and God does all the heavy lifting."^{ix} God says, "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals – every living creature on earth." Now prior to this sermon I would have been confident in my declaration that God's covenant was with Noah and Noah's family, a nice predicted context. And perhaps the author of Genesis also feared that we would just run with our assumptions, because within these ten verses we are reminded 5 more times that this covenant is between God and all creation, not just with Noah and his family. "The re-creating God acted to promote all life, not just human life."^x

Now within our human tendencies we might read this covenant and want to try to insert a "but if you..." clause. However, this covenant contains no conditional statements. This covenant in fact describes more about God, God's character and intention than it does what are the responsibilities about the other parties. In fact we are told in verse fifteen God selecting the rainbow as a sign of the covenant is a way to help remind God of this covenant, of God's commitment, steadfast, patient, grace filled commitment to humans and all of creation. Note that the people have not experienced a change of heart. The flood did not wipe out their human

tendencies towards violence, self-destruction, and sin. And, “God doesn't wipe away the creation entirely and then walk away. The flood is in fact the means of re-creation. God washes the earth clean and both God and the earth begin again.”^{xi} The flood becomes then the space to be able to create something new out that which was destroyed by violence, greed, and sin. We see this at different points in the entire biblical story. In fact, as we studied the year of the bible we commented that the story of Bible is in fact a story of finding the way back to God, and God constantly reaching out to us. Ultimately this comes as God sends God's son to earth, the incarnate one who walked among us.

Here we are at the beginning of Lent. I suspect that our hearts and their natural inclinations would resonate with those during the time proceeding and following the flood. In Lent we are reminded once again, in poignant and powerful ways, that God chooses to be there with us, time and time again. God chooses to be in relationship – to exude love, exhibit patience, and extend grace. Stated succinctly, God keeps loving us and all of creation.

This morning we worship a God of re-creation. Hallelujah! Our God is one who has not set the bar so high that if you fail to hit the mark the first time you are out of luck. Nor, is our God one who is without grace, and second chances, and do overs. Our God is one who welcomes and invites repentance, and beginning again. How would you life look different if you considered these next forty days as days God dwells with you on an ark? This would not just be a cruise vacation. Instead, the flood would provide the space to create something new from within you, an opportunity for the cleansing waters to wash you as you seek right relationship with God and neighbors? What type of re-creating does God desire to do within you? What might only be possible if you yield yourself to water chaos and the erupting of waters from above and below?

What are you clenching so tight that might need to be caught up with the waves surging around you?

And, after forty days, how might our relationship with all of creation be transformed and re-created? The covenant in Genesis chapter nine makes clear God's dedication and love of all creation, of all creatures, and all people. We worship a God who embraces creation, time and time again. There are serious ecological implications of this covenant. How are we caring for creation and helping all of creation flourish and thrive? How are we part of its destruction? In this season of reflection how are we being called to repentance for our contribution of violence toward other parts of God's creation? How might we join God in freshly embracing creation?

What will be different in 40 days? 40 days with God. 40 days to ponder, reflect, pray. 40 days to join God on the ark and allow the flood waters to transform the landscape around you, within you. 40 days to invite God to continue the grace filled act of re-creating us and all of creation. 40 days. May the dreaming, yielding, repenting, and God's re-creating begin.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Leader, "Worship Resources: Winter 2017-18", 33.

ⁱⁱ Leader, "Worship Resources," 33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cameron B.R. Howard, "Commentary on Genesis 9:1-17",

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2375

^{iv} Howard, "Commentary," https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2375

^v Elizabeth Webb, "Commentary on Genesis 9:1-17",

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1222

^{vi} Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, Pennsylvania), 68-69.

^{vii} Roop, *Genesis*, 69.

^{viii} Webb, "Commentary," https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1222

^{ix} Howard, "Commentary," https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2375

^x Roop, *Genesis*, 70.

^{xi} Webb, "Commentary," https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1222