



Grace Church

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Rector

ORIGINAL BLESSING AND THE FIRST COVENANT

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, February 22, 2015

Readings: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25;1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Sermon text: God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “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.” Genesis 9:8

The season of Lent has begun—that carefree season of late winter that began with ashes on Wednesday and the catchy refrain: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Here’s a variation on that truth: remember that you are earth and to earth shall you return. Human comes from the same root word as humus, soil; Adam, the first human, from Hebrew adamah, earth. We were molded out of the stuff by God, according to Genesis 3, who breathed life into him and set him in the Garden of Eden He and Eve were given dominion over all the other animals—but for a reason, to tend the garden and name the animals.

Our original blessing—that we are made in the image of God¹—was given so that humanity may be a blessing to the earth. We were created to be stewards of creation.

Unfortunately our likeness to God and our capacity to serve God well as stewards of God’s creation have been tarnished and weakened by the original sin of rebellion against God and the subsequent fall from grace and the expulsion from

¹ So God created humankind (Adam) in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27

the garden (Genesis chapter 4). This is the biblical mythopoetic explanation of how we came to live in this world of hard work and painful birthing, where power and love are confused and self-interest overshadows love of God and neighbor. Human history is a painful struggle to learn how to live together justly—and we are just beginning to realize that unless we take seriously our original job as stewards of creation we will wind up expelled from this earth, this garden, as well.

Which is more or less what happened in the story of Noah and the flood. Chapter five—brother kills brother, Cain and Abel. Humanity is fruitful and multiplies—that commandment we are good at following—but leaves violence and destruction in its wake. God realizes that human nature has a sinful inclination and decides to clean the slate and start over (Genesis 6:5- 7). But Noah, the righteous and obedient, has found favor. He and his family—his wife, three sons and their wives—are given the task of sparing the living animals from destruction.

Children, you know this story. Noah builds a giant ark to save himself, his family and at least two of every animal. The rains came and waters rose. The whole earth was underwater. But after almost a full year, the flood receded, the ark landed, and everyone got off the boat. And then God made a promise never to flood the earth again—even though God understood that the human heart has an evil inclination from birth (Genesis 8:21).

“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.”

And to seal the deal God put a rainbow in the sky, like a bow on the package. So now, whenever you see a rainbow, remember God sees it too—and everyone can relax knowing that God will never again release a mighty flood of water to submerge all the dry land of earth.

And so God reestablished through Noah the original covenant God made with humanity through Adam in which humanity is blessed with freedom and power (dominion) but in return commanded to be responsible stewards of creation.

We have taken the freedom part to heart, but neglected our responsibility to be good stewards. God has promised not to flood the earth again, but we are raising the water level ourselves through carbon emissions driving global warming. And just as science is getting close to naming all the species, human fruitfulness and multiplication over all the earth is reducing natural habitats to such an extent that another mass extinction of species is imminent.²

We had better get right with God and get back to the keeping our side of God's covenants. Covenants, plural, because God has not just taken off and let humanity run wild without doing anything about it. The whole Bible is a record of God's continuing creative and redemptive work.

Over the five Sundays of Lent I will talk about the covenants God has made with and for us. We have looked this morning at the first covenant with Adam, reestablished with Noah and all living things (indeed with earth itself: Genesis 9:13). This is the broadest covenant. All humanity and all life is part of it. Later covenants become more particular: the covenants with Abraham and Moses, which I'll talk about in the next two weeks. And then the prophetic covenants that are fulfilled through Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit: the new covenants of the cross and the the heart.

But this morning let me conclude with a few more thoughts the general idea of a covenant.

What is a covenant? and how does it differ, if at all, from a contract? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of London, once spoke to the assembled Anglican bishops about covenant. I think he makes the difference very clear:

“In a contract, two or more individuals, each pursuing their own interest, come together to make an exchange for mutual benefit. So there is the commercial contract that creates the market, and the social contract that creates the state. A covenant is something different. In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither can achieve alone. A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an ‘us’. That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform.”³

Another writer put it this way: Contract is to covenant as ink is to blood.

And here is what is amazing about this whole idea as applied to God and us. God signed the ultimate covenant with his own blood, the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has skin in the game.

2 See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. 2014, Henry Holt.

3. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Address to the Lambeth Conference 2008: “The Relationship between the People and God”.

But before we get to this covenant of the cross, and the redemption of a broken world, let us stop and reflect on the first covenants, with Adam and Eve and Noah and all living things. God in these acts and promises is indicating something: a concern for our wellbeing, and that of all creation and all living things. God cares and wants life to flourish. We are called to be a special part of that dream and will. We were given an original blessing and called to be a blessing. Let us strive to be faithful to that first earth covenant.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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