

Becoming Covenantal Partners (Again)

Sermon 141 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 15, 2022

Genesis 8:18-22, 9:8-17

Let me tell you a story. It's a love story actually, one that began a long, long time ago. In fact, some might say that it is the oldest love story there is. This is a story of a God who - before anything else existed - had a dream for a world where life could flourish and love could be unleashed. In response to this dream God began to create. Light and dark, wet and dry, creeping, climbing, crawling, swimming, and soaring things to grow and occupy all the spaces that had been created. Each piece a relational response to what came before; each beloved one bearing the fingerprints of their creator.

Overtime the shadow side of freedom moved God's beloved creation to wickedness and greed; and God's heart was full of grief. In fact, the pain was so deep that God decided it would be better if it didn't exist at all - and so God decided to blot it all out.

But then God remembered Noah, and once God remembered Noah then God remembered his wife and his children. And then God remembered those creeping, climbing, crawling, swimming, and soaring things that were created for the land, the sea, and the air. And in this, God remembered the love that once transformed a dream into reality. God's vision of harmony and wholeness once again surfaced; so God gave the plans for a boat - a life raft - big enough to sustain all the life and love that was created so that they might weather the storms of pain, grief, and regret.

Once the storm was over, and the waters subsided, showing once again the distinction between dry land and raging sea, a window cracked open and Noah sent out a bird in search of new life. After several attempts, the bird finally returned with a branch, giving away the truth that life existed out there, beyond the sight lines and the unbroken horizon. Seeing this, Noah knew that he and every living thing aboard this gargantuan life raft had been given a second chance.

At this point you may remember this story. Perhaps images of the ark and the rainbow are filling your mind. If I close my eyes I can see it clearly as if painted on a mural just in front of me. Clouds and colors stretching themselves into a heavenly arch while the wooden boat rests on the land below, unloading coupled up creatures once again set free to roam and to replenish the earth.

But these images can distract from the love story that I want to tell you today. They distract because they pull our attention back down here, to our people-centric lens. But, if we can release that lens and zoom out a bit, we might notice that while the people are unloading the ark and rebuilding their homes, God is hovering nearby.

Soon after the ark is emptied, Noah worships God with a burnt offering and the aroma rises to the heavens, brushing over God's nose. (Don't you just love the thought of a God who can smell what we're cooking? It's right here in the text!) As the story goes, the smell is pleasing to God. So pleasing that it evokes a response of grace and mercy. In that

moment, full of love, God makes a promise, a new covenant born out of renewed closeness, love, and a desire for relationship.

Christian ethicist and biblical scholar, Miguel De La Torre writes that in this new covenant, in this new promise after the flood, God vows to never again blot out every living thing on account of human evil and wickedness. "Scaring humans into obedience with threats of worldwide calamity and devastation did not and will not work." De La Torre continues, "Humans did not change, [as a result of the flood] but the unchangeable God did. Humans will hopelessly continue to imagine evil in their hearts; nevertheless, God's resolve to wipe them out will not be part of this new world order, for a more intimate relationship is established between God and humans. God transforms God's self into a God of long-suffering patience and endless mercies." (*Genesis*, 121).

I told you it was a love story, didn't I?

What other force, but love, could compel God to embrace such vulnerability?

What other force, but love, could insist that though freedom comes with heartbreak, it is still worth it in the end?

What other force, but love, could change the heart of God from pain to compassion?

What greater example of love exists, than this? God, the Creator of the universe and all who live within it, set into motion things as they should be, a whole world created and ordered for harmony and peace. Then after watching greed, wickedness, and evil take root within that very creation, God moves from grief to promise. And make no mistake about it, the promise is not *with* creation, the promise is *for* creation.

"As for me, God says, 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, 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.

And 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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds, and the bow is seen, I will remember my covenant that is between you and every living creature of all flesh..."

What greater love exists than this? That God would set a reminder in the sky – not for us, but for God – so that no matter how hard it gets, no matter how badly we rebel, no matter how much pain we inflict, no matter how far away we run, God still cares.

God still loves.

And God still wants to be in relationship with everything that God has made.

So the bow in the sky is for God. It's like a little sticky note taped over the red "abort mission" button, insisting that one pause and remember the cost of destruction.

Yes, this is a story about love.

So how then are we to live in light of this love?

Well, fortunately, this is a question we do not have to answer alone. Thousands of years of history provides us with insights from religious thinkers and teachers. Since we are in Genesis and it is a Jewish text, we can go to the Talmud, a written collection of biblical commentary, written primarily by second century rabbis; an ancient rabbinical conversation on the scripture. There are of course additional resources available for those who would like to continue their study beyond the year 200 (CE). In this ancient and modern conversation, the rabbis have identified something they call the Noahic Covenant or the Noahide Laws. Though these are not specifically listed in the text, these can be understood as the human response of God's post-flood covenant. Here they are:

- Do not worship idols.
- Do not curse God.
- Do not commit murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not eat flesh torn from a living animal.
- Do establish courts of justice.¹

Of course, much like the 10 Commandments given to Moses and the other 613 laws given in scripture, these seem to have one thing in mind: healthy relationship with God, with neighbor, and with creation.

So let's ask ourselves again... If God's self-emptying love is established after the flood, and if that love's greatest hope is to be in relationship, then how should we respond?

You know, in addition to the Noah story, Christians and Jews share a lot in common. Both religions proclaim that God is relational *and* that our purpose (especially when we are in right relationship with God) is to show the world that God cares. Isaiah 49:6 calls us to be "a light unto the nations" just as the Gospel of Matthew proclaims "You are the light of the world (5:14)." And as we live into this reality, the shared vocation, we begin to see that the responsibility to build and repair brokenness is ours as well as God's. We are partners with God in this way.

And, while we're studying God's post-flood Covenant, let us not miss the fact that God's covenant is specifically for not only Noah (humans), but also with the earth. God says it repeatedly in the text.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Laws_of_Noah

And if it mattered so much to God that the earth be included in this new covenant ... shouldn't it also matter to us as we seek to partner with God in the work of love?

In ancient Judaism, there is an idea that "the world was shattered shortly after creation into countless 'shards,' and [that] only intentional work can repair the brokenness."² This is such an important belief that it is included in the *Aleinu* prayer, which is a prayer repeated every day by some and in most worship services. One line translates like this: *It is our duty "to repair the world in order to bring God's presence."*³

It is a daunting task, for there is much to repair.
There is brokenness and there is hatred.
There is poverty and there is greed.
There is hunger and there is gluttony.
There is despair and there is privilege.

There is devastation as resources are mined, plucked, harvested, and removed with little regard for sustaining life.
There is ambivalence and denial when it comes to our concern for the earth that you created and redeemed.

There is a chasm that grows between us and our dreams – which are really God's dreams – for wholeness, health, harmony and most of all love.

So how then shall we live?

Perhaps we should become true partners, covenantal partners with God again, remembering that God's love isn't just about us, but also the earth. Why else would the text have repeated that line over and over again as the God states the promise?

... this covenant I make between me and the earth...
... between me and you and all the earth...
... between me and you and your descendants and every living creature...

I have told you that this *Here on Earth* series, this three-week focus on creation care is a stretch for me. I've told you that I'm learning with you as we go. So when I prepare each week, I'm digging through twice as many books, reaching out to all kinds of friends who are farther along this path than I am, and I'm discovering some really amazing work. Both in the Christian tradition and (as you heard today) in the Jewish tradition. All of these ideas and writings are illuminating for me a more honest and more spiritual commitment to care for and repair the earth: a partner with God in this holy and still-unfolding love story.

² *Relational Judaism*. p 73.

³ *Ibid*.

Though the world may be shattered now, into what feels like a million pieces, broken and scattered about, there was a time – albeit brief – when all was as it was intended to be. In that first garden, the one we call Eden, everything was as God dreamt it could be and Love roamed wild.

Maybe that's the story we need to remember, as we consider the invitation to become partners with God again. Because in truth, when we partner with God to become a light for the world, a repairer of all creation, we are simply adding our voice, our experience, our handprints and our hearts to the greatest love story that has ever been told.

So today, I want to tell you a story, it's one that God began and that I hope we, together might continue to write. And it begins like this...

God so loved the world...