

## **Here is the Promise**

### **Genesis 9:8-17**

Good Morning Church Family,

It's wonderful to be together today. Today marks the first Sunday of Lent, which is the 40 days leading up to Easter. Lent officially began Wednesday which was Ash Wednesday.

This morning we're going to talk together about Covenants, specifically the Covenant that God has made with all of creation to redeem it, to make all things new. Now, what exactly is a covenant? When my kids ask me this, I say it's sort of like a promise, a commitment to do something. When a couple gets married, especially if they are people of faith, we talk about the marriage covenant, the vows that the couple makes to each other of how they will conduct their lives, how they will relate to each other in this new union.

When Taylor and I got married, we (more or less) used the "traditional marriage vows". I say more or less because I did not promise to obey Taylor. We chose those vows, rather than writing our own, which was very trendy at the time we got married, because we wanted to say the same promises that couples had been saying to each other for a long time, the same promises that our parents and grandparents said, something that connected to us to a bigger story of loving, honoring and cherishing- for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.

A covenant is different from a promise in that a promise feels more contractual, like something you might do when you visit a lending office. You know, signing a promissory note. I'll keep up my side of the deal as long as you keep up yours. If you break your side of the promise, the things you said you would do, then the deal is off. A contract is conditional.

A covenant, however, is a vow, an unbreakable commitment to one another. Even if one side fails to live up to their promise, the covenant still stands, it is not called off. Further still, just because one side fails to keep the covenant, that doesn't let the other side off the hook from what they have agreed to do in this covenant.

I did a lot of reading and talking this week about the Treaties that we made between Indigenous people and the Government of Canada for an article that I was writing for Canadian Mennonite. A covenant is very similar to the Treaty that was signed here in treaty six territory in the sense that the treaty is on-going, there is no expiry date, there is no statute of limitations. In fact, the words that are used in Treaty Six to explain how long this covenant, these promises apply for "as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow." Based on those words, we could reasonably say that this treaty, this covenant is forever. It doesn't expire. And a lot of the advocacy work that First Nations are doing with the government of Saskatchewan and Canada is reminding them of the covenant they made, and that they are required to honor that. With a covenant, like with a treaty, one side can't say, "oh that was a long time ago", "oh but it didn't work out how we thought it would", "oh, honouring this treaty isn't advantageous to us." It's for forever, and First Nations keep calling the government back to the treaty. They keep reminding them of the covenant.

In our scripture for this morning, we read the story of God making a covenant with Noah and his sons, but also with all of creation, all of humanity. This covenant is the first Divine and Human, God and Humanity covenant that occurs in the Bible. This takes place after God preserved Noah and his family, and two of every kind of animal on the ark, when the great flood came, and covered the entire surface of earth. In the aftermath of the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah that he will never again flood the earth, destruction on this level will never happen again. Rather than wiping out creation, in hopes of starting anew, God covenants that God will bring life, not death. Further, God makes a sign of his covenant, the rainbow, to remind all of creation of his promise to bring life, and not death.

I'd invite us to think about God's Covenant with Humanity as on-going and evolving. I said that the Noachic Covenant was the first Covenant between God and Humanity, and each time God makes a covenant in the Bible, it goes a little further and a little further. Each "update", if you will, to the covenant goes a bit further, reveals a bit more about God's heart, God's posture towards humanity. So, the first covenant is that God will never again flood the whole earth. The next iteration is the Covenant with Abraham, God would make him into a great nation and so make his name great. (2) through him God would mediate blessing to others. So it goes a step further, God is crafting a people who will mediate his blessing to others. The next ratification is the Covenant God makes with the Nation of Israel following their rescue from Egypt. The Mosaic Covenant, meaning it came through Moses, said that God's people would be a

“treasured possession,” “kingdom of priests,” and “holy nation”. They were to live differently than other nations, they were called to another standard, another way of living. Then came the Davidic Covenant. This update to the covenant identifies more precisely the lineage of the “offspring” who will mediate international blessing: He will be a royal descendant of Abraham through David. This covenant therefore introduces a subtle but significant shift in focus. With the great nation promised to Abraham now firmly established, attention zooms in on his royal progeny (c. This royal line, already traced explicitly in Genesis culminates in an individual, conquering “offspring” who fulfills the promise of and the hope expressed. This is sort of God’s way of saying the fullest expression of my heart, of my covenant, of my promise is coming, it’s coming through David’s line—we know that to be Jesus Christ. God in Human Flesh.

In scripture, at the Baptism of Jesus, we see God declaring to Humanity that Jesus is the one who will usher in this new covenant, this final promise. “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” That’s Mark 1:9-15, one of the scriptures from the lectionary this morning.

The New Covenant ushered in by Jesus's life, death and resurrection is the promise to redeem all of creation, to make all things new, to break the hold that sin and death has on all creation. I think the benediction to book of Hebrews says it really beautifully, "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

God cannot break God's covenants. God keeps God's promises. And God reminds us, over and over again, of the promise. And that covenant is sustaining for our lives as followers of Jesus.

As Lent came around this year, I was thinking about it is often the promises that sustain us through wilderness, or desert experiences. About how when things feel too untenable, so unsurvivable, like we're in freefall, God's promises remain.

I am a person who struggles with anxiety, it's been a struggle my entire life, one that has thankfully become more manageable over the past few years thanks to prescription medication. When I heard that my Dad was experiencing an issue with his heart and it meant going to see a specialist, my anxiety spiked. What if they can't fix it? What if it's more complicated than it seems? What if..? What if...? What if...? There are lots of people in my circle of connection who are experiencing hard things. One only has to

pop on to social media or read the newspaper to see awfulness reported in real time. As I was walking my dog in the early morning darkness this week, all the what ifs were filling my prayers. And the response that kept coming up in my heart and mind is, "I will be with you." "I will be with you." "What if it's some terrible diagnosis?" "Then I will be with you." "What if I face some really hard thing that I just can't imagine?" "Then I will be with you." "What if..." "Then I will be with you." I'll keep my promise. I'll be with you. I will bring life. I will be with you.

In the Christian tradition, one of the purposes of Lent is to be reminded of Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness. After Jesus' baptism, scripture tells us that Jesus went into the wilderness where he was tempted, in all the ways that we as humans are tempted, for 40 days. Yet God was with him. Jesus was still God's beloved son. The truths of God still held for Jesus. And the truth of God's covenant still holds for us, even when we are in the wilderness. This is a hard road, but I am with us. Jesus is with us. We can be reminded of the covenant.

In the Psalm that is part of this morning's lectionary, we hear of the prayer of the Psalmist who is both struggling in a wilderness, and at the same time longs to rest on the promises of God. This is Psalm 25:1-10, "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all

day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees." The Psalmist is hanging on to the covenant.

Earlier this week, the kids and I went out for a ski at River Ridge after supper. Things didn't go as planned, the trails were icier than they had been our last trip out there. We fell a lot. Tempers flared. And so the whole trip took a lot longer than I had anticipated, and I impatiently tried to move the kids along, Junia said, "You know what I don't like about the dark? I can't see what's behind me. Something could be there and I wouldn't know." I affirmed that yes, that's what most people don't like about the dark, including me, so let's keep going so we're not out here in the dark with the wild animals. So, we shuffled along for several more minutes, Ezra in the front, me in the middle, and Junia in the back. At one point, we were bumping into each other, and so I asked Junia, do you want to swap places with me?, and she cheerfully replied, because Junia is unfailingly cheerful, "Sure! Then I don't have to worry about what's behind me, because I know you're behind me." I don't have to worry about what's behind me, because I know you're behind me. Out of the mouths of babes.

The covenant that God has made, the promise to bring life through Jesus, the promise to be with is like that. We don't have to worry about what's behind us, because we know the promises of God. We can remind ourselves and remind each other in the midst of hard times, in the midst of the Wilderness, and even as a spiritual discipline during lent, "Here is the promise. Our God is for us and for us. Our God is bringing all things back to him.

Amen and Amen.