***A COVENANT WITH CREATION***

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Texts: Genesis 9:1-17 and 1 Peter 3:17-22

Were you to choose the name of a new church, your church, what name would you choose? Lately there has been a movement away from traditional church names toward more contemporary choices. According to a website entitled, yournextbible.com, among the top 25 ideas for a unique church name are: The Found Flock, Soul Smiths, The Prayer Hub, and Unrelenting Worship. Perhaps this is in response to some of the unfortunate names chosen across the years, among them: Boring United Methodist Church, Half Way Baptist Church (in Halfway, MO), Little Hope Baptist Church, Original Church of God (I wonder how old that church is!), and the aptly named Run for Your Life International Chapel.

When this church was formed in 1959 all those possibilities were bypassed, surprisingly enough, and the name COVENANT was chosen. According to the organizing pastor, Dr. Herbert S. Turner:

*When the group who formed Covenant Presbyterian Church began searching for a name that would express something of the vision which led them to organize a new church, and that would embody something of the spirit which they hoped would be a permanent characteristic of the church they planned to build, the word ‘covenant’ seemed to be most appropriate. (*More appropriate thankfully than LITTLE HOPE or RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!)

As Dr. Turner describes it, the rich significance of the word ‘covenant’ led the group to unanimously decide upon the name COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. What was that rich significance? Dr. Turner continues:

*First, it commemorates one of the great periods in Presbyterian history. Some 300 years ago (*now 365 years ago*), our Presbyterian ancestors in Scotland signed the famous National Covenant (many of them with blood drawn from their veins) in which they bound themselves together ‘in the great name of the Lord our God’ for the defense of their religion even unto death. It was an expression of great loyalty which made Scotland Presbyterian, and has been the inspiration of many of their descendants in all parts of the world*.

Is that what comes to your mind and inspires you when you think COVENANT? If not, perhaps it is this second suggestion of Dr. Turner:

*The theology of the Presbyterian Church is a ‘covenant theology.’ The covenant idea runs through the Bible from beginning to end. It is a word which best expresses God’s love for all his people. All the great creative experiences in the Bible are described in terms of a covenant relationship.*

That description seems more fitting for us. In these coming weeks of Lent, I want to reflect on some of those biblical covenants that are so important to our heritage and our calling to be COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. Today we begin with one of the first stories many of you learned in Sunday School – the story of Noah and the flood, for it includes the first recorded covenant in the Bible. You know the story – and it is a story – but do you remember the covenant?

The human experiment has gone terribly awry in God’s eyes; evil rules the hearts and minds of humankind; violence marks their days. So bad is the result that “*the Lord was sorry he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved God to his heart*.” That is what the text says. Things were so bad that the God of all creation regretted the day God formed humans from the dust of the earth and breathed into them the breath of life. Things had not gone as God planned or intended. If you think that all that happens – good, bad, or ugly – is what God wills, then this part of the story rejects that errant theology. Here God not only finds humankind out of control, but decides that it is beyond redeeming. Only Noah finds favor in God’s eyes, so when God decides to scrap the whole creation experiment and start again, God spares Noah and his family. In faithful obedience, Noah builds an ark in the desert with nary a cloud or raindrop in sight, gathers the animals as instructed, and battens down the hatches as the first raindrops hit the ground. It rains and rains and rains, and the flood waters rise and rise and rise, and all creation is drowned in a return to that watery chaos from which God first created all things in Genesis’ first chapter. The turning point in the flood and the flood story comes with these words in Chapter 8:

*But God remembered Noah and all the animals in the ark.*

It is only then that the rains stop and the flood waters subside, only then that God rescues the ark, saves Noah and the animals, and restores creation – only when God remembers does God act with grace and mercy for all creation.

We live at the mercy of God’s memory. Were God to forget us, then we would be without hope for we are utterly dependent upon God. At the source of our greatest angst is perhaps that fear – that we will be forgotten by God. It is the fear of the Israelites in the wilderness, the fear of Israel in exile, the fear of the psalmist echoed in Jesus’ words from the cross: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” Perhaps it is your fear too. Am I forgotten? Does God remember me? What about me, if anything, **does** God remember? We may pray with the criminal who hangs on the cross at Jesus’ side: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* We don’t want to be forgotten. But then again, we don’t really want to be wholly remembered either. What is it that you would have Jesus remember about you?

Do you want him to remember how you’ve lived, the things you’ve said and done? Truth be known, there is much in our lives we hope Jesus will forget, things we would like to forget as well – unkind thoughts and words, selfish motives and missed opportunities, sins that stain our hearts and hands, skeletons that line our closets. Would you have God remember those? We really want selective divine memory – God’s recall of only those moments of faith and faithfulness we have had, those times when we were faithful witnesses and obedient disciples. Remember me at those times, Lord! And we’d like God to forget all those other times that are tainted by sin. We echo the words of the 25th psalm: *Lord, remember your mercy and steadfast love. Remember us, but do not remember our sins.* That is how we want God to remember!

God does remember, that is the testimony of the Bible, but perhaps God’s memory is something more than just recalling a list of our deeds and thoughts, good and bad; perhaps it is something bigger and more grace-filled. Perhaps it is not so much who we’ve been or what we’ve said or done that God remembers. Perhaps it is simply us that God remembers, the children of God for whom Christ came even though we were sinners, the ones who are tempted as Jesus was tempted, but who unlike Jesus too often give in to temptation.

*Jesus, remember me. Just as I am without one plea, remember me.*

Jesus didn’t come to us because God remembered how good we were. Jesus came while we were sinners because God remembered God’s promise to be our God. Jesus came as a sign of God’s great love for us. Jesus came to assure us that we are never forgotten, never forsaken, always remembered.

The rainbow was, according to the text in Genesis, placed in the sky by God to jog God’s memory; it is there, not to remind us of God, but to remind God of us and the covenant God made with all creation. The bow in rainbow is, like a bow and arrow, a weapon of war. The rainbow is thus the assurance that God is no longer at war with creation, having hung up that bow in the sky as a sign of peace. It is a sign for God of that promise never to let the waters of chaos return to destroy the earth and all who dwell herein. The rainbow reminds us of God’s grace shown to us in Noah’s day and in our lives day to day.

But note that this covenant is not just with us, but with all creation – a covenant with all living things, a covenant between God and every living creature on the earth. We humans have a unique place in creation, being those who are created in the image of God, but that does not mean that the Lord is only our God. The Lord is God too of your dogs and cats, your sheep and cattle, your canaries and the cardinals that visit your birdfeeder, the deer that eat your tulips and the mice that raid your pantry, for the Lord God made them all! All creation sings God’s praise, says the psalmist, and that same God made this covenant marked by the rainbow with all of creation too.

Our role in this covenant is to be fruitful and multiply, echoing God’s charge at creation, but it is also to care for it all and for one another. God entrusts to us the wonders of the world – the soil, waters, skies, and all who dwell herein. It is an awesome responsibility, one that we have borne none too well. We pollute streams and air for the sake of profit, scour forests and fields to satisfy selfish desires, recklessly risk the extinction of species for greedy gain, and contribute to the damage of climate change. All those failings bear witness against us! We who are to care for the world have ravaged it for selfish purposes. We have allowed violence to creep back into our common life as in Noah’s day, evident in the carnage of wars in Ukraine and Gaza and the shootings in Kansas City this week. We are increasingly like the earth in Noah’s day when God decided to scrap it all and start again – and God might be tempted to do so again, BUT the rainbow shines as a sign of God’s covenant not to repeat that carnage, but to persevere with us.

It is a covenant not just with us, but with all living things, a covenant that says God will remember and preserve us, love us and care for us; in return God asks that we love God, love our neighbors, and care for God’s world so that the world may be more the way God created it to be. *The Kingdom of God is creation healed*, suggests one theologian.[[1]](#endnote-1) We are to be those who participate in the healing, not the destroying!

Four days ago, we began this Lenten journey with ashes and the holy words: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* The covenant marked by the rainbow is a covenant with all things that are dust – including you and me – to dust we all shall return one day. Remember that reality on this Lenten journey and remember too the covenant with you and with all the other dusty living things God made, the covenant with a rainbow as its sign, the covenant that says: God remembers! Thank God, God remembers! Amen

1. Hans Kung, cited by Ernest Campbell in *Campbell’s Notebook*, Vol. xvi, no.1, p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)