

“Covenant One: Noah”

Genesis 9:8-17 • Psalm 25:1-10 • 1 Peter 3:18-22 • Mark 1:9-15

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First Sunday in Lent

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is the forty-day period leading up to Easter; it begins on Ash Wednesday and continues all the way to Holy Saturday, without counting the Sundays. It is a dedicated “time for growth in faith - through prayer, spiritual discipline, and self-examination in preparation for the commemoration of the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus Christ,” as our *Book of Common Worship* defines it. The word “Lent” comes from an old English word for “springtime;” it is a time for *renewal* and *rebirth*; it is an ideal time for us to renew and deepen our faith in Jesus Christ. If you take it seriously, you will *grow spiritually*. If you just “give up” something for Lent, and then – after Lent is over – go back to living your life just as you did before, then you’ve kind of missed the point!

The length of Lent is significant: forty days. The torrential rain that flooded the earth in the book of Genesis lasted ... forty days. Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving God’s Law for ... forty days. The prophet Elijah journeyed back to the holy mountain over a period of ... forty days. Jonah walked through the streets of Nineveh proclaiming a message of repentance for ... forty days. After his baptism, Jesus was in the wilderness for ... forty days. And, finally, the span of time between the resurrection of Christ and his ascension into heaven was ... forty days. That number forty has significance. *Important things in the spiritual realm can happen in forty days.* Your life can be totally changed in forty days!

In most years, the scripture passages for this first Sunday of Lent focus on the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record three specific temptations that the devil put to Jesus. Mark’s Gospel simply says that, after Jesus was baptized, “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.” Mark doesn’t give us specifics. We are left to *wonder*.

Since our Gospel lessons are mostly coming from Mark this year, the scripture passages for today point us in a different direction. Today’s Old Testament reading is about the first *covenant* God made with humanity. A *covenant* is a solemn or binding promise or agreement between two parties, usually formal in nature, typically in writing, and often affirmed with some kind of visible sign or seal. Next week we will hear of the covenant that God made with Abraham, and the following week we will hear about the covenant that God made with Moses. Three biblical covenants, all *very* important, all *very* different. Later on in Lent, we will hear about the *new* covenant that God promised to the people of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah, and which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So we’re going to spend most weeks of Lent this year exploring these biblical *covenants*, these four vitally important *agreements* that God established with us and with our ancestors in the faith. Some of these covenants have lasting significance for us Christians today; some do not. It’s important that we understand which is which.

The first covenant in the Bible is the covenant with Noah. 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.” The context, of course, is the story of the great flood, which resulted from God’s judgment on humanity: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air—for I am sorry that I have made them.’” One family alone was spared: Noah, who “found favor in the sight of the Lord,” “a righteous man, blameless,” together with his wife, their three sons, and their sons’ wives – eight humans in total. God told Noah what was about to happen: “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood...” So Noah built an ark, and into the ark went those eight humans, and representatives from every animal, bird, and critter on earth. Then the rains came: “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.” Everything that was on the surface of the earth drowned in the flood: God “blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left and those with him in the ark.”

Now if you are wondering when this occurred, if you want to pinpoint it in time, well, that’s challenging. You would need to take into account all the available evidence – the biblical account, other similar stories from the ancient world, and the geological record. It’s important to listen to what the rocks tell us ... because God created them too. As for parallel stories, look first at the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, an epic poem from ancient Mesopotamia, which contains a flood story that has a remarkable similarity to the biblical story. You can find that one at the public library, or in most bookstores. A similar flood story can be found in an Akkadian epic, and still another in a Sumerian narrative. All of these seem to have emerged at roughly the same time in the same part of the world. Comparable stories can also be found elsewhere: there are Hindu texts from India that tell of a great flood, and a god telling the first man to build a boat to save himself; there’s a Zoroastrian story from Iran about a flood caused by a deity and about a man who survived in an ark with his cattle; even the ancient Greeks had a similar story, in which Zeus punished humanity with a flood, and the titan who had created humans instructed one man to build an ark to save himself. It’s a little hard to determine which stories came first and influenced other stories later on – but it’s also remarkable just how *widespread* the story of a great flood actually is.

In the biblical account, when the waters eventually receded, Noah, his family, and the animals disembarked, and Noah promptly built an altar to God to give thanks. God then promised *never* to do that again: “I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.” God gives Noah and his family some instructions – “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”; don’t eat anything that still has blood in it; do not shed human blood; “abound on the earth and have dominion over it” – and then comes the covenant: “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is 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.” That’s it; that’s all there is

to it; it's very short. It's a promise, an *unconditional* promise. It doesn't matter how bad humanity ever becomes – God will *never* punish the earth and its inhabitants like that again. It seems that God had *learned* something: that humanity – despite God's best intentions and hopes – was *fundamentally flawed*. Punishing the whole world *did not* and *could not* solve the basic problem. *There's something wrong with us*. God had created us good, but evil had entered in, and corrupted us, *fundamentally*. There was nothing God could do to fix it – other than sending *Jesus*, but that would come later.

The sign of this covenant was, of course, the *rainbow*. “God said, ‘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 over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.’” Every time we see a rainbow, we can remember God's everlasting promise: *never again will God destroy the earth as a punishment*. *Never*. The rainbow reminds *God* of that as well. God grieves at how much evil there is here on earth – but no matter *how* bad it *ever* gets, God will *never* do *that* again. God knows: *that won't solve the problem*. Only *Jesus* can.

I mentioned that God had given Noah and his family some instructions when they exited the ark. In later Jewish tradition, that story got expanded. Traditional Jewish texts that stretch back eighteen centuries affirm that, in addition to giving Noah an everlasting covenant, God also gave Noah a set of seven laws that are binding on all of Noah's descendants – which means they are binding on *all of humanity*, since – according to the biblical account – *all of us* descended from Noah. These are called the “Seven Laws of Noah.” they are a set of universal moral laws, and they include: (1) do not worship idols, (2) do not curse God, (3) do not commit murder, (4) do not commit adultery or sexual immorality, (5) do not steal, (6) do not eat flesh torn from a living animal, and (7) establish courts of justice. From about 1800 years ago right up to the present day, many Jewish leaders affirm that these laws are binding on the whole human race, and any non-Jew who observes them is assured a place in the world to come. I first learned about these Seven Laws of Noah when I visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem several years ago. Some Jewish agency was distributing pamphlets to tourists. With about 10 million people visiting the Western Wall in a typical year, that's a great place to spread this message to the world!

In Christian tradition, on the other hand, the story of Noah is often seen as a precursor to baptism. The reading from the first epistle of Peter establishes that just as God saved Noah and his family from the waters of the flood, God likewise saves *us* through the waters of baptism, our symbolic “dying and rising” with Christ. Just as the waters of the flood cleansed the earth, the waters of baptism cleanse *us*. That passage from 1 Peter also affirms that Jesus, in that two-day interval between his death and resurrection, “went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.” That is to say, Jesus visited the realm of the dead, to give those souls an opportunity to hear the Gospel message of salvation. All those people who had died in the flood now were given a chance to hear and respond to the Good News.

To be clear: God's covenant with Noah is an *unconditional* covenant. Humanity does not *have* to do *anything*. God will keep this covenant *regardless* of how good or evil, moral or immoral, we are. Our personal or collective behavior has *no bearing* on whether God will keep this covenant. It's a *promise*. It's a *gift*. We didn't earn it; we certainly don't deserve it; God gives it to us anyway. That's called *grace*.

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