Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent February 18, 2024 Genesis 9:8-17

On the Sundays of Lent this year, we hear readings about 5 of the covenants that God made with people, as told in Genesis, Exodus, and Jeremiah.

These covenants all involve God essentially saying, “You’re my people, I’m your God, and here’s what that means.”

All of these stories lead us to the new covenant that Jesus establishes at the Last Supper, the covenant we remember every time we gather around the altar to celebrate Holy Communion.

I thought it would be interesting to spend some time with the covenant stories this year, so my plan is to focus on each of them, today through the 5th Sunday in Lent.

Today, we get the first of the covenant stories, which comes at the end of a very familiar story.

Like many of you, I learned the story of Noah and the Ark as a child. My picture Bible had a drawing of a boat with the heads of animals popping out in various places, happy smiles on all aboard.

I remember wondering how all those animals peacefully coexisted during all those weeks on the ark, wondering how Noah managed to feed all of them, with their different dietary demands. And wondering why God insisted upon saving all the icky creepy bugs.

It was a simple story back then. God was deeply grieved – *not* angry – filled with sorrow about the wickedness of humanity, the violence of human hearts.

So God decided to try again and told Noah to build the ark, save his family, save animals and birds and even those yucky bugs. Noah built the ark and gathered the animals. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights, and anything not on the ark died.

That last bit gets glossed over *a lot* when you tell the story to kids, if you think about it.

Eventually, it stopped raining. Noah kept sending out a bird to see if the waters had receded enough. One day, the bird flew off and didn’t return, so Noah knew it was OK to let everybody off the ark. God placed rainbow in the sky to remind us that God won’t ever do something like that again.

All of which was accompanied by happy pictures in soft pastel colors and lots of drawings of rainbows.

Today, I have a more complicated relationship with the story.

Like the fact that Noah *never* speaks during the whole Flood narrative. Not a single word. He doesn’t, like Moses, protest that he’s unworthy. He doesn’t, like Abraham, try to convince God to relent from punishment. He doesn’t say *anything*. And I’m not really sure what I think about that silence in the face of so much destruction.

This story reminds us that God has not just the power to create, but the power to destroy. And, while God promises to never destroy life on earth through a flood again, destruction isn’t explicitly removed from the realm of possibility.

As a creative sort of person, I can – on a *vastly* smaller and *far* less important scale – understand the occasional desire to rip everything out and start over again, perhaps with different materials, or a different pattern altogether.

Yet it’s hard for me to reconcile this story, with all its death and destruction and the vaguely threatening notion that the bow God sets in the sky is symbolic of a hunter’s bow, with God’s repeated instruction to love our Creator with all our heart, soul, and being, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

But then again, maybe it’s *because* of this story that God insists we love our neighbors as ourselves. Maybe part of the point is to remind us of what happens when we don’t.

We learn quickly that humanity was essentially unchanged by the Flood. The saga of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, which forms the bulk of Genesis, is filled with backstabbing, conniving, lying, and people just basically being generally awful toward one another.

For millennia, people have wondered why God didn’t create humans so that we were incapable of being generally awful toward one another. And some have argued that the fact that God chose *not* to create us that way is proof that God does not exist.

Others have wondered, if God was so grieved by the wickedness of humanity, then why didn’t God didn’t just start over with Human 2.0, a new version of humanity, likewise created in God’s image, but incapable of sin.

But God doesn’t make that choice.

Instead, God commits to humanity, warts and all, and promises to never again send a flood that would destroy life on earth.

A covenant God makes that comes with no expectations on the part of humanity. There’s no list of expectations, no mention of blessings for obedience *or* curses for disobedience.

Just a rainbow in the sky that serves to remind God of a promise freely made out of infinite love, that offers us an unspoken invitation to trust in God’s fidelity.

That issue of trusting in God will come up again, as we hear about the other covenants over the next few weeks. It seems that whenever the people had trouble trusting God, God turned it into an opportunity for reassurance and promise.

As I was writing this, thinking about the rainbow as the sign God chose, the thought flittered through my mind about how it’s said you can’t prove a negative.

Well, apparently you *can*, as mathematicians and scientists have been happy to prove in ways that quickly make my eyes glaze over.

I thought about it because it occurred to me that God chose a rainbow – a meteorological phenomenon that generally *requires* there to be rain in the vicinity – as the sign that God won’t destroy the world with a flood again.

Rather than choosing the negative, the absence of rain – a blue, cloud-free sky – God chose the rainbow.

So, in the midst of the rain, the sign from God appears.

A sign of hope, just when we need it the most.

God never promised Noah that there won’t be destruction or death.

But the rainbow reminds us that there is life after loss, hope in the midst of destruction.

We hear this story during Lent, as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter, because the promise of the gospel is that death is not the final word. Human sin, the wickedness and violence of our hearts, is not the final word.

God’s love for all that God has created is the final word.

And, at Easter, we see just how far God will go to ensure that nothing separates us from that love.

Thanks be to God for that unconditional, unending love.