

**All in the Same Boat**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
February 18, 2024

**Message:** We enter into covenant with the God of all creation that holds us all with love and value.

**Purpose:** To enlarge the sense of covenant that we each hold as part of the world.

**Scripture:** Genesis 9:8-17 [I will read]; Psalm 25:1-10 [Please read]; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

**Synopsis:** We are people of contracts. Our world is ruled by agreements of every shape, size and nature spelling out how the relationships that we are involved in should work out. Within them, the relationship and the responsibilities must be clearly defined, most of all speaking to the limits of who is in the relationship, and who is out. Here, in this relationship with all of creation, God draws no limits. God goes out of the way to name all elements of creation as broadly as possible, including not just humanity (with whom the issue had been in the first place), but the entirety of the created order in the way things will be going forward. This becomes a covenant—the operational relationship that describes the nature of the connection of two groups, regardless of the nature and breaches of the other (as opposed to a contract that is conditioned on behaviors). How does the extensive, expansive literally all-inclusive sense of covenantal relationship move us toward the invitation to receive the grace of God in all things?

### **Old Testament**

Notes (for Bryce's reference):

[http://www.evernote.com/l/APku\\_Ncq-OFG\\_6Ape\\_1GfqZS41WNez-2z6c/](http://www.evernote.com/l/APku_Ncq-OFG_6Ape_1GfqZS41WNez-2z6c/)

[A Covenant of Change gen 17\\_1-7\\_15-17 3-8-2009.doc](#)

[Commentary on Genesis 9:8-17 by Wil Gafney](#)

[Lent 1B Center for Excellence in Preaching](#)

[Four Stops in the wilderness](#)

*Genesis 9:8–17*

<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

<sup>9</sup> “As for me, I am establishing my covenant  
with you and your descendants after you,  
<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.”

<sup>12</sup> 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:

<sup>13</sup> I have set my bow in the clouds,  
and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

<sup>14</sup> When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> When the bow is in the clouds,  
I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant  
between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

<sup>17</sup> God said to Noah,

“This is the sign of the covenant that I have established  
between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

We tend to be people of the fine print. Our world is full of it, ever more so. Chances are you have entered into the binding agreement already this morning. The surfing you did before you even made it out of bed accepting the cookies and what not that allows you to see the web page that you wanted to see in the first place. Sure; it is just accept tracking, but ultimately that is a contract between you and the provider. If you stopped for coffee or gas on your way here (if you pass such things) and paid with a card, you are bound by the agreement part and parcel with the process of breaking out the plastic. On and on it goes. The number of times that we promise faithfully that we have, indeed, read and understood the terms and conditions that pop up on our way to using our new app, never mind that none of us have actually read those self same terms (though it is interesting now and again to do so, if by interesting you might mean a little bit frightening). Like the fact that the coffee cup handed me through the drive through window should be treated with caution as the contents are indeed hot, or that the silica packets that come in things best left dry are not meant for internal consumption. The ins and outs of the world are stitched together with binding arbitration, disclaimers, and just general legal wrangling just to do what we need to do.

Our story this morning is somewhat ironically one that is often left in the children's section. It is a sure fire hit for the earlier year set—the Lord comes and is set to bring a flood because the world had gone bad. But the cool part is that there are animals—2 of every kind—gathered which lights the imagination to new heights alongside the obvious questions like “seriously; mosquitos?” The flood comes up the rain comes down and the boat is rocked. But soon enough dry land is found and the rainbow is placed in the sky. But if you get beyond this broad outline you have an angry God, a wicked world, and a devastation that is meant to clean the shop once and for all. There really isn't a whole lot of age appropriate material at work here to tell the truth. It has been more than once that I have had Noah raised as a proof not of the goodness of God but the warped nature of scripture. God has come to the table with an agenda and it is not a happy one at that. So we leave Noah well enough alone not quite knowing what to do with the devastation and the judgement along the way. There is a sneaking suspicion that the work of cleansing may not be fully over if ever, and we read this story looking for loopholes and exceptions like “well God promises never to use water again to destroy the Earth” and consider all the other means at God's disposal. We are looking for the contract and the way that this contract could work one way or the other.

But I think that is missing the point fundamentally. Of course we want to have this be a contractual thing—it would spell out the minimum expectations for God not to wipe us cleanly away and give us the basic expectations for us not to incur such wrath. But in doing so, we make the workings of the us-and-God relationship almost entirely about the rights and responsibilities (the stuff that we know of our world) and forget about the relationship that is being pieced together in this and so many cases. Relationship, the connection of people with purpose and identity, cannot be the work of contract, but must always be connected by way of covenant instead.

Our contracts seem to have an inverse premium on words. The more precise, spelled out and comprehensive a document can be, envisioning every possible outcome of the relationship and the consequences for it the better we are equipped to deal with the circumstances. That is certainly the way things can work. With everything spelled out then there is no wiggle room left and we can make sure that everyone and everything is properly managed.

Were this true, one would expect a whole lot of contract when re-establishing the world after wiping the slate clean from the beginning. If it was going to be right this time, it should look a whole lot like dotting the I's and crossing the T's. Instead you get “God remembered the people and the animals” (8:1) and God declaring the way things should be not by setting out limitations for human behavior (straighten up or this might happen again) but rather by constricting God's behavior in declaring never again. Yes; there are some expectations around how to eat and the fundamental justice of a society in the first part of Genesis 9, but none of it is setting out the conditions to prevent what just happened from happening again as a consequence for these infractions. If the point was to purify, then why set out basic law from day one? In Chapter 8, there is an expectation that people will get it wrong (Genesis 8:21) confessing that human nature is prone to failure. So if establishing contract by hitting the big universal reset button wasn't the point, what was?

I think this was to refresh covenant, and allow this to dictate the way things would be. In some ways it is bringing things all the way back to Eden, declaring that God will remain in the relationship with all of God's creation come what may. Regardless of the whys and wherefores of the events of the floods, we have God setting up a covenant with the whole of creation (he says this 3 times—all the animals, birds, etc—so it is a big deal) of how things will proceed. Nothing depends on how things go, or we'll see. There are no conditions on display here. YHWH simply

puts it out there: this is how things will be from here on out. We struggle to get this because this is so far unlike anything we typically see in our world.

Covenant is the establishment of an active relationship, and unlike a contract which can be broken, it is a relationship that defines how two people will be in that relationship *regardless* of what happens with the other person. Our closest analogy of marriage has tarnished of late as even that great intent does not hold the permanency it once did. A covenant is a bond of behavior that binds one to the other under honor to be part of each other's lives, come what may. God takes on this covenant of how things will be by speaking into being the nature of things going forward, not just with us; not simply with the people whom God had left in charge back in Eden, but now God says God will live in love with all creatures, never again destroying creation. God says "you all are in the same boat—all of you all—plant, animal, vegetable, all of you. I promise to remain in relationship with you, regardless of what happens, regardless of how things go, no matter how you disappoint each other; no matter how you disappoint me." God makes covenant happen not to establish law and order in the world, but simply to be who and what God is, reminding us by this covenant who we are and what the world is—God's good creation.

This of course does not mean that there are not consequences for the ways in which we stretch and strain the covenant. Even where covenant is the rule there are ways in which the relationship can break, sometimes not to be repaired. Sometimes our actions of covenant are not in the long-term best interests of the relationship and there are consequences for that. But we must know this: there is no where that we can be, no identity that we can hold which invalidates the covenant of God's love for and with us. As my kids weary of hearing me say: there is a difference between I love you no matter what and letting you do what ever you want. Indeed, it is because I love you that I am going to make sure that you know what is right and what is wrong.

In this season of Lent, we are reminded to think again of exactly whose we are, where we belong, and to contemplate the covenants of our lives, those things by which we live, those things in which we trust. We are reminded to consider the relationships between us and God, what binds us together, and what can stand in our way of trusting that relationship. God's covenant was made not only to particular people in a particular place and time, studied as a historical happening through which three major religions take their story of origin. Yet this

creation, this beginning is the point from which all of history is being lived, and the covenant to which draws us in. These covenants can never be small but always must keep growing, even to the ends of the earth. Every time we think we have found the bounds of who is inside the covenant of love, we are asked, always to think again. God makes no provision for others in declaring love for all creation. That was true then, and is equally true now.

This covenant is amazing, but that does not make it easy. It can be hard to live out God's love for the world that is so impossibly wide that it is beyond our imagination. Ours is a reality that feel especially unlovely, and a world whose sin seems utterly transparent. We tie ourselves into knots, claiming that our understanding and implementation of the fine print of God's covenant is the good news and the way to bring about what we so long to see, that our ethics, our morality, our means is what God requires as opposed to any other. God's covenant is alive and well regardless of our skepticism, our resistance, our incomprehension. Because it is God's covenant of love to all things, everywhere for ever more; it is dependent on God and not on us, and in that it will never die. And that is Good news.

My invitation to you this day is to consider those areas in your life that you are longing to see this loving covenant of newness fulfilled, to see your sense of covenant expanded. God's covenant of love is with all people and for all times. We are called to simply walk in that covenant, expecting the ongoing recreation of God's work in our lives, being surprised along the way as the covenant gets ever larger. Where is that you long to see newness yet again in your world and your life? What is it that you are being asked to carry for the journey? What is that you are being asked to leave behind? However you feel it, however you encounter it, I invite you in this week and the weeks to come to contemplate how you wish to claim the covenant of love for yourself, for our community, our reality, our world and to walk with the knowledge that no matter how impossible, how unbelievable, how inconceivable, that life is promised to us in all things and all times. May this be our promise, our covenant, and our cause, now and always. Amen