

I Will Remember My Covenant

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC; February 18, 2024

Genesis 9:8-17:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, 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." 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. 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." 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."

Mark 1:9-15:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and was with the wild beasts, and the angels served him.

You can't read the bible without running into stories about covenants which tend to be bumpy affairs. When we come together in relationship, there are never any guarantees.¹

We may know these experiences from our marriage or divorce, our partnered commitments, or being a covenanted member of a faith community, for example.

Someone spills the beans about something you wanted held in confidence. Your partner has decided to make a major career or other life change requiring a move and loss of income. Someone you love has become ill and your dreams of adventures together are supplanted by coming up with a homecare plan and it is no one's fault. Your child lies to

¹ The word covenant means "to come together (Latin = *convenire*) and agree" around shared promises we make to each other. The Hebrew word for covenant is *berith* and is derived for a word for "cutting" because an animal was sacrificed and the parties who were entering into covenant would pass between cut pieces of animal flesh to signify their agreement.

you because they are too afraid to tell the truth about something. Or maybe it is you who is fudging the story, so you don't have to admit that your life seems to be coming off the rails. But perhaps there is also someone in your life who has come through for you when you most needed them. In our relationships, joys and sorrows, heart-breaking disappointments and deep bliss, times of feeling connected and feeling disjointed, all come hand in hand.

If we have some familiarity with stories from the Bible, we may have heard about covenants God makes with Noah and his family (featured today), Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob with Rachel and Leah, Moses, and David to mention examples from the Hebrew scriptures. Their lives, too, contain stories of courage, heartbreak, betrayal, and gradual understanding. As Christians we also affirm that God is making a new covenant through Jesus Christ. We are now the ones called to have courage, deepen our trust in God and live into our own calling to bear the fruits of God's love, no matter how bumpy that gets.

A common theme throughout stories about covenant is that God takes initiative in inviting us into relationship. Then God goes to great length to help us find a way forward when we stumble and fall into forgetting who we are or grasping for security on our own terms. By the time we get to Noah and his family in the flow of the biblical story, envy, fear, violence, and greed have already become hallmarks of an emerging humanity. Genesis 5:6 says that God was grieved at heart and ready to start over with all of creation. As the story goes, God sends a great flood to wipe everyone out except for Noah, who supposedly tried to live in harmony with God's covenant, and his motley crew of humans and animals on the ark.

There is actually some evidence for a catastrophic flood involving changes in the Mediterranean Sea and the emerging Black Sea back over 7000 years ago². So there may be

² <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/evidence-for-a-flood-102813115/#:~:text=Scholars%20usually%20attribute%20things%20like,around%20the%20Black%20Sea%20some>

some actual physical event such stories draw from out of the memory of ancestors. To be sure, I don't mention such major environmental shifts from past times like this as some evidence against the ravages of human caused climate change which I think are very real. Rather, I am curious about how Hebrew people connected such events to their own awareness that we humans are prone to forgetfulness about who and whose we are and the sacred relationships we have been called to honor. So, while I don't take the story of Noah's Ark and God's intention to destroy creation literally, I am curious about by the wisdom it might entail.

You might have noticed how I listed some of the key human players earlier who are bearers of the covenant in the Jewish tradition. However, our story from Genesis reminds us today that humans, even one like Noah, were only part of the story. Today's passage affirms that God makes a new covenant not only with Noah and his descendants but with all of creation. "As for me, 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...(Genesis 9:9)." I trust the earth here includes creatures if the sea. First Nations cultures also remind us that it includes all of the land itself, its minerals, the water, the air...

Keep in mind also that it is an animal, a dove, which is sent from the ark twice until it returns with an olive branch which is both a sign of dry land and has become a symbol of peace for us. It becomes the symbol for the Holy Spirit in our Christian tradition. The bow mentioned in our text could have been used as a weapon of destruction but becomes a rainbow. It is like a bridge to God to continue to remember this everlasting covenant of peace. Of course, the rainbow has become a symbol of the diversity of creation which God affirms and embraces. I find it almost humorous that God keeps repeating the intention to remember this covenant. We have probably all heard that we need to hear a message at

minimum seven times before it can really register and stick in our memory! Ancient neuroscience seems to be at work here.

Jesus knew he belonged as part of creation. As our text from the Gospel of Mark reminds us, he was not afraid to step right into the river of baptism to join us on this wild human journey of life. He became one with the water which also flowed through his body as it does through ours. He depended on the air for his breath, this earth for food, and on fire for warmth. He entered into the wilderness of life by the power of the Holy Spirit. There, he faced all that wanted to tempt him to embrace a false sense of power and belonging and resisted.

Victoria Loorz reminds us in her book *Church of the Wild* (which some of us will soon be reading) that the Hebrew word for wilderness – *ba midbar* – means “the organ which speaks.”³ Jesus trusted the earth, the land, and its creatures to be alive with the wisdom of God and he listened. The wild animals were with him, connecting with him as were the angels who ministered to him. For him, there was no separation between the material and spiritual, the animal and human. The wilderness was the place where Jesus found the clarity and strength to go forth and spread a message of love. He also issued a call to change our minds and hearts to come into greater alignment again with God’s vision for the world. We are his heirs.

I would like to share one story about how many young people on an island off the southern coast of Iceland are keeping their own covenant across species with other young members of creation.⁴ It has been a tradition for youth there to go looking for young puffins who have lost their way. When puffins leave their nest, their bodies theoretically know to follow the light of the moon shimmering on the ocean as they fly out to sea. However, it is increasingly

³ Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us Into the Sacred*, p. 61.

⁴ See the shortfilm “Puffling” by Jessica Bishopp featured in Emergence Magazine.

https://emergencemagazine.org/film/puffling/?utm_source=Emergence+Magazine&utm_campaign=0d0f4062b8-Puffling%E2%80%949420240211&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_73186f6259-0d0f4062b8-357051286

easy for these fledgling birds to get confused by lights from human civilization, mistaking them for the moon. At night, industrial, and residential areas are often lit up brightly. Birds get stranded on rooftops or other areas near towns. Many don't find their way back to the high cliffs from which they can fly off to look for food in the ocean. Many die before getting out to sea.

At this time of fledging, many youth are out and about at night looking for stranded puffins, often getting to bed very late for school the next day. Together with other friends, they collect the birds, try to calm them down and deal with the anxious calling and biting that come with the task. These young people articulate that they, too, will soon leave their nest to become adults. As I watched it, I felt like I was watching young humans honoring their covenant to care for creation, connecting with another species around their shared task to grow into who they are called to be and become. Let us watch about two minutes from the story now which illustrate their commitment.

Watch first segment (minute 2:08 – 4:08)

Two young women, Birne and Selma, are featured in the film. They deal with all the ups and downs of being teenagers from breaking fancy nails in bird rescue to trying to listen for their own vocation. One is often on her own already while her single dad father is out to sea while the other takes care of younger siblings. One already knows that her desire to become a doctor will require her to leave the island for university while the other hopes to stay in her ancestral home if she can find work. They are united in their task to help the “pufflings” get off to a good start while the climate changes around them. Let us watch another very brief segment which shows them releasing the birds.

Watch second segment: 17:38-18:16.

Here they are tending to their unique call to love a particular birds to help them launch with love into an uncertain future, but they cannot do it alone. When I see the faces of these young women, I see both hope and concern for the future for the birds and themselves. Already, the warming waters are affecting migration and mating cycles not only for the puffins but for those species they depend on for food. These young women are also facing into a future of change that is affecting their volcanic island home with more change to come for their own children.

How might we rekindle our love and covenant for caring and belonging to this wild and precious earth? What particular part of creation is calling to you to renew your sense of awe and care? This is our shared invitation. Let us not fall into forgetting or turning away in fear of what is to come. Let us face forward, with humility and grit, to honor God's covenant rainbow of peace with all of creation in its diversity. Let us refuse to buy into old stories of domination and exploitation. Jesus modeled this for us in the wilderness. Let us also reclaim our own baptism alongside Jesus, touched by the dove of peace, the Holy Spirit, to remember that we are beloved and empowered to honor the creation God so dearly loves. The cost of inaction is greater than the cost of needed change. God remembers the covenant. So can we.