

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Genesis 9:8-17

“I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”
 (Genesis 9:13 N.R.S.V.)

Anticipointment

Former Beatle, Paul McCartney coined the term “anticipointment.” He used it to refer to the feeling that fans have when the new song from an established group fails to make them feel young again. (Dynamic Preaching, 2-21-21, p. 40)

Ah yes, anticipointment. We had such high hopes, but it just didn’t go as we hoped.

Have you ever wondered if God experienced aniticpointment with human beings? God created people with high hopes that we would always live in a loving relationship with him. God had a great master plan. But we human beings messed it up. God gave us free will and we used it to rebel against God. Of course, since God is all knowing, God must have known that this would happen. Still, it must have hurt God greatly.

In our Old Testament lesson we come to one of the best loved of Bible stories. It is the story of Noah and the ark. Human beings had so rebelled against God that God sent a great flood to wipe them all out, all of them except for a small remnant. Noah and his immediate family are saved along with seven pairs of every clean animal and one pair of every unclean animal.

I find it interesting that when God wanted to start over with his creation, he didn’t actually go back to scratch. God just couldn’t bear to completely let loose of his creation. Instead God saved the best of the best. Noah was the only righteous man left in the world and so God chose to save Noah and his family, and then to rebuild with them.

I find it interesting that one of the first things that Noah did after the flood was over and they were all back on dry land was to get drunk and naked and embarrass himself and his family. Here we have the only righteous man left in the world and right after the flood he is back to sinning.

Yet, in spite of that, knowing all that, God still chose to make a special covenant with Noah. We know that covenant as the covenant of the rainbow. God made a binding agreement upon himself that never again would he send flood waters to cut off all life.

When we read of God hanging his bow in the sky, our minds immediately jump to an image of the arch of brilliant colors we often see in the sky after a rainstorm. And that is appropriate. However, what God says is that he will hang his bow in the sky. The bow that God hung up for us to see is his war bow. He hung it in the sky as a sign that he would never again make war on human beings. God was done with that. And so God made a special covenant with us.

Let me pause for a moment here and talk a bit about the concept of “covenant.” Covenant is a churchy kind of word. It is not a term that we normally encounter in secular language. But in church we often say that we are a covenant people. We are defined by the covenant that God makes with us. It tells us who we are.

The word covenant is related to the English words for will and testament. We are familiar with how people make a last will and testament to express their wishes of what they want to see happen. That is why we refer to the scriptures from before the time of Jesus Christ as the Old Testament or the Old Covenant. And we refer to the scriptures from after the coming of Jesus as the New Testament or New Covenant.

The word covenant is a word for a binding agreement between two or more parties. Thus, we sometimes speak of the covenant of marriage. That is an agreement between equals. But other covenants are not between equals. The covenants that God makes with us are mostly about what God will or will not do.

In the covenant of the rainbow, God promises not to make war on us, regardless of how bad we become. In the covenant established by the death of Jesus on the cross, God promises us to save us. It is true that we have to choose to accept that salvation, but all the work is done by God.

God’s covenants with us are most like what happens when parents adopt small children. The children don’t earn the right to be adopted and are often too young to even agree to be adopted. Yet the parents promise that from that time on, this child will be their child and they will be his or her parents. Adoption is a legal action, but it is also much more than that. Adoption is an act of the heart and the will. It goes far beyond the letter of the law. The decision to adopt a child is the decision to choose to have your heart forever walking around outside your body.

God’s covenants with us are like that. Even when we rebel, still God claims us.

Now there are a couple of things that I want to say about our covenant relationship with God. The first one sounds a bit negative, but it is important. I hope you will give this due thought.

In our covenant relationship with God, God is disappointed with the best of us. I say that to point out our need for humility. Some people act as if they think that God is lucky to have them on his side. Have you ever met anyone like that?

The truth is that none of us lives up to God’s hopes and dreams for us. God always wants so

much more for us. Again, I will point out that Noah, the one righteous man left on the earth was saved by God in the ark. But upon getting back on dry ground, the first thing Noah does is get drunk and fall down naked where everyone can see him. He falls into sin. And if that can happen to the most righteous man in the whole world, it can surely happen to you and me.

One of the meanings of the word sin, is to “miss the mark.” We all fall into sin. None of us is perfectly righteous. All of us need God’s help and forgiveness.

That brings me to the second thing that I want to say about God’s covenant relationship with us. God loves even the worst of us. God is disappointed in the best of us. But God also loves even the worst of us.

As people we are always tempted to label some others as bad and some as good. We think some people deserve help and some are hopeless. We are tempted to puff ourselves up in self righteousness and condemn those who do not look like us, or sound like us, or think like us. But we are reminded again and again that we will never look on a face that God does not love. God loves even the worst of us.

That doesn’t mean that we need to tolerate, much less approve of hurtful and evil actions. It does mean that we don’t get to write anyone off as beyond God’s love and God’s help.

I was reading about a young soldier in the Nazi army in 1941. He was taken prisoner by the allies and while a prisoner was shown pictures of the horrors of the concentration camps. He came to realize that he had been serving a great evil. A chaplain gave the young man a bible and helped him come to faith in Christ. In 1947, he was invited to come to a Christian conference in which he received the love and forgiveness of Dutch Christians who had suffered so much under the Nazi occupation. This young man found himself reborn.

His name was Jurgen Moltmann. He went on to become one of the leading theologians of his time. He became known for his theology of hope. I really like this quote from Moltmann: “But the ultimate reason for our hope is not be found . . . in what we want, wish for and wait for; the ultimate reason is that **we** are wanted and wished for and waited for . . . God is our last hope because we are God’s first love.” (Moltmann’s writings, *Quotes from The Source of Lie, The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, Fortress Press 1977.)

Think about that for a moment. God is our last hope because we are God’s first love. You are God’s first love! Yes, God is sometimes disappointed in you even when you think you are at your best. But God loves you even when you are at your worst. God refuses to give up on you. You are God’s first love.

God created us, breathed life into us, and dreamed great dreams for us. God has never given up on making those dreams come true for us.

In the fullness of time, God sent his son Jesus the Christ to come to earth to die on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, to be resurrected to glory as the first fruits of the dead. All so that we might come to know and experience and live God’s dream for us. That dream is a loving

relationship with him and with others. That dream is the abundant life.

We are in the season of Lent in which we talk a lot about the need for repentance, for coming back to God. Let me share one more story with you.

Major Barbara Sherer served as a military chaplain in Kuwait. She wrote about a time close to Ash Wednesday when a fire swept through the camp. The tent that the troops were using as a dining hall and as a chapel caught fire and burned to the ground. Fortunately, no one was in the tents at the time of the fire so there were no injuries or deaths.

The ashes to be used for the Ash Wednesday services were in the tent that burned. So on impulse, the chaplain decided that she would use some of the ashes from the burned tent for that purpose. She went to the scene and asked one of the soldiers to gather some ashes for her. He immediately scooped up a cup full of ashes and handed it to her.

Later as she was getting ready for the service, the chaplain noticed a glint of silver in the cup. Upon examination she discovered a silver cross, tarnished but still whole. What are the chances, she thought, that a random scoop of ashes would include this cross? To her it was a symbol of how God keeps finding us, saving us. God keeps bringing us through times of fire and disaster, burned and battered, but unharmed. (“Out of the Ashes” by Carlos Wilton. Published on Beliefnet.com 3-29-03).

Wherever we have lost ourselves. God finds us and brings us home. God never gives up on us. Because we are God’s first love.

So if anyone listening today feels lost and far away from God. It is not too late. God loves you. God has been searching for you. God wants you home today.

Let us pray. Amen.