

- **Fulfilled** – when God makes a promise it is guaranteed to come about; God is faithful and God’s promises are fulfilled and God’s purposes achieved, even if it takes many years to happen.
- **Accompanied by a Sign** – God provides us with something physical to remind us of the promise and of God’s love and faithfulness to us.
- **Foreshadows the New Covenant in Jesus** – God created the world to be a paradise, a place of plenty and peace. We ruined that by our selfishness and sinfulness. God’s ultimate goal is the restoration of the entire created order.

Which is a nice segue into the first covenant in our series: the covenant with Noah. You know the story of Noah: it’s one of the bedrock stories from Sunday school. God created the world, but we ruined it. Beginning with Adam and Eve, human beings turned from God and disobeyed God’s wishes, until the world was so wicked that God decided to wipe the slate clean and start over. God was both sad and mad at humanity.

Now, Noah was a man faithful to God. There’s a big difference between faithful and perfect. After the flood Noah gets drunk and lays around his tent naked (Gen. 9:20-21) – Noah was not perfect, but he was faithful. For when God tasked Noah with building an ark and filling it with his family and two of every creature, Noah obeyed. Then God sent a mighty storm to flood the earth. For forty days and nights Noah, his family and the animals rode out the storm, until at last, dry land appeared. As Noah’s company disembarked, God blessed them and commanded them to repopulate the world (*be fruitful and multiply*, Gen. 9:1); but there would be some differences in this new world.

Whereas before Adam and Eve were tasked with caring for creation (*have dominion over the animals and birds and fish*, Gen. 1:28), now humans and animals would be wary of one another because God gave all plants and animals to humankind for food. And since Cain killed Abel, unleashing an indifference for human life, God made it very clear that going forward the taking of human life was forbidden because humans were created in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). Should human blood be spilled, God would require a blood sacrifice to make things right again (Gen. 9:6). God’s intent was for this new creation to succeed.

With all of that as introduction, we finally arrive at the covenant: *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* (vv. 8-10).

God initiates this covenant. God makes this covenant with a faithful man (Noah) and with Noah’s sons and descendants, the succeeding generations. What’s more, God’s covenant is universal in scope: it extends to every living creature.

Then God gets to the specific promise: *‘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’* (v. 11). Only God could make such a promise because only God can command the wind and the waves. This covenant is unconditional because there is nothing we could do to start or stop a flood of this magnitude. There is no condition humans can create that will force God to renege on God’s promise.

God, who is faithful to us, fulfilled this promise: although floods still occur around the world, there has never again been a flood that destroyed the entire world. It may be small comfort, but the words of 2 Peter 3:10 bear witness to God’s faithfulness to God’s covenant promise not to flood the earth again: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare*. So, no worldwide flood, but all-consuming fire at the end of days!

If you prefer a happier testimony, look to the Prophet Isaiah: *This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you* (54:9-10). God’s steadfast love will not depart from us, and God’s covenant of peace shall never be removed!

Then, to seal the deal, God gives Noah a sign: *‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature...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’* (vv. 12-13).

We typically think of this as a rainbow, which appears after a rain storm, as a reminder that God will not flood the earth again. But there is another idea here: God says “I have set my *bow* in the clouds” (v. 13). The Hebrew word we translate as “rainbow” is actually a reference to a battle bow or a hunting tool. In Near East mythologies stars in the shape of a bow represented the anger or hostility of a god; but here the warrior’s bow is hung upside down, pointed away

from the earth as a sign of peace, a token of reconciliation between God and creation. The unstrung bow stretches from earth to heaven, from horizon to horizon. An instrument of war becomes a symbol of peace through God’s covenant with Noah.

The lesson for us is that when we see a rainbow we should always remember God’s faithfulness, God’s love, and God’s amazing grace toward us. God’s intent is not to hurt or destroy us, but to teach us how to live in peace and faithfulness with God, with each other and with creation. We must also keep in mind that God is a holy and righteous God who has a holy hatred for sin and who will not allow sin to go unpunished forever. When we test God’s patience, God will take steps to correct us.

Our God is also merciful and compassionate and forgiving. Just as God provided a way for Noah and his family and the animals to be saved in the ark, God also provides us a way to be saved from our sins through Jesus Christ. God saved Noah and his family and the animals from God’s wrath in the flood; so too, will God save those who in Christ are saved from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10). God’s ultimate purpose is the restoration of the world, a return to Paradise, abundance and peace for the entire created order. God’s covenant with Noah foreshadows our redemption in Christ, and God’s ultimate renewal of the world.

The covenant with Noah is not really anything new: God still desires peace and harmony with humanity and creation. The eternal purpose to save humankind from sin was made long before the covenant with Noah. What we find in this covenant is God’s purpose reaffirmed, the confirmation of that purpose in history, and the affirmation that God truly loves and cares for us and all creation. God, who is all-powerful and ever-faithful, cannot and will not be swayed from this divine purpose and goal.

What a wonderful comfort these covenants are: they permit us to know exactly where we stand with God. Initiated by a faithful God to less-than-perfect people and their descendants, covenants show God’s heart opened to us. Given to all of creation and supported by God’s powerful will until their fulfillment, covenants show God’s mind open to the future. Accompanied by a tangible sign and pointing to the new covenant in Christ, covenants are God’s arms open to us, drawing us back and bringing us home.

Prayer: God of the covenant, stretch your bow above us as a sign of your faithfulness. In the beauty of creation may we see your love written large and make a response of faith, with your help. Amen

## The Covenant with Noah

Sunday, September 18, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Genesis 9:8-17

“Covenant” is Bible-speak for a promise or an agreement between two people, by which both parties make promises about how to behave toward each other. For example, when two people marry they enter the covenant of marriage, promising to love, care and be faithful to one another. After World War I, the allied powers formed The Covenant League of Nations (pre-cursor to the United Nations) as an international body dedicated to peace between countries. In our church’s history, the Scottish Covenanters and the English Parliamentarians entered into The Solemn League and Covenant (1643) promising aid for one another during the English Civil War and against the Catholic forces of King Charles I.

The concept of a covenant between God and God’s people is one of the central themes of the Bible. Throughout the Scriptures, God makes covenant promises to human beings: what’s more, God always keeps those promises! Over the next few weeks, we’ll study the five major covenants of Scripture – the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus – then on Stewardship Sunday we’ll look at how we are asked to live out those covenants in the world today.

In these covenants we see eight common characteristics. Each covenant is:

- **Initiated by God** – God who comes to humanity, usually during dark times, and makes a promise that will set human beings on the path back to God.
- **Made with a Righteous Person** – God finds a faithful person with whom to make the covenant. These are not perfect people, but they are faithful people who seek to do God’s will.
- **Given to Succeeding Generations** – God’s promises are not one-time events; they apply to our children and our children’s children.
- **Universal in scope** – God’s promises are for all who hear and obey God’s word.
- **Unconditional** – in each covenant God asks something of us, but the fulfillment of the covenant is not ultimately dependent upon our behavior.