

More than a Promise

Genesis 9: 8-17

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Greensboro, North Carolina
February 11, 2018

Noah and the Ark is one of our best-known Bible stories. I mean, how many murals have we seen on Sunday school halls showing God's furry creatures under a rainbow?

But when my kids were small, I would not read them this story. Let me remind you how the story goes.

It's just a couple of generations after God created the wonderful earth and the first humans, Adam and Eve. But in a few short generations, these human beings have gone off the rail with their sinfulness and violent behavior. I'm not sure what God expected but in God's disappointment, God wants to start over. So God chooses the only righteous man around, Noah, and tells him of the plan to flood the earth. Noah is to build an ark, a ship that will withstand a great flood. Only Noah's family gets a pass... along with a plan to bring in animals, two by two, so that the earth can be repopulated.

So why would I not read this story to my young children? Because in their impressionable minds we present a story of God who basically will destroy the people of the earth because they are misbehaving. I just could not have my children believing that was the kind of God we worshiped... a God, we were teaching them, who loved us, a good God, great and compassionate God whose nature and character we could see in Jesus. No, God is good and God is great, and God is great because God is good.

But, of course, the story does get better. Way better. After the flood, God has a change of heart. God promises this will not happen again; there will be no more floods to destroy the earth and its people. And to prove it, God gives a sign of promise, a rainbow which stretches across the sky.

Now, one way you can read the story is by saying that God was a fast learner and that like a new parent, God learned that using violence against violent, misbehaving children is to go

down the wrong road. So in the story it seems God changes from a God of punishment to a more gracious and benevolent God.

However, my contention is that the story of Noah's ark is not the turning point where God became a different kind of God; rather the story is the turning point where human beings began to understand this about God.

Are you with me? Feel the difference?

I

So, don't get me wrong about the Noah story. Though I was iffy about letting impressionable young minds hear and interpret the story, this is one of the most important stories of the Bible! Because it is the first time in the Bible we encounter the word, *covenant*. And *covenant* is one of the all-time most important words for people of faith.

Listen again:

Then God said to Noah.....I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you.

I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

I will remember the everlasting covenant.

God says, *covenant* seven times in this passage. And if we keep reading the biblical story, we will find *covenant* throughout.

Covenant was with Noah, then with Abraham, and then Moses. The Prophets rail against the Jews because they keep breaking the *covenant* with God, and then Jeremiah promises a new *covenant*, which turns out to be Jesus; and we remember that Jesus on the night before he was crucified, passed the cup to his disciples and said: "This cup is the new *covenant* of my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins."

II

Covenant is one of our most important words. Do you know what a *covenant* is?

If you say it is a contract, I'd say you were in the ball park. Contracts we know about. We sign a lease, a contract for an apartment: We agree to pay, not tear up the place and not play the music too loudly. Then the owner provides the space to live and amenities; he fixes the plumbing when things gets stopped up.

We sign contracts for work, and contracts with a bank for a mortgage: Each party agrees to do something or provide something for the others.

But covenant is more than a contract. If you say covenant is a promise, you'd be in the ballpark and getting closer. Our life and our world is full of promises.

Political campaigns are full of promises. "I give you my word." And we try to judge whether a politician is a person of his or her word.

Every commercial is essentially about some product that promises to make our life better, right?

And promises are the stuff of relationships. When we baptize our children, we promise that we will raise them in a life of faith; and we in the church promise that we will be the village surrounding those children with a witness for Christ.

At confirmation, we profess our Christian faith and promise that we will serve Christ and his church.

And perhaps the most important life promise we make... or certainly the one with the greatest consequence, is when we say to someone, "I will love you forever, 'til death do us part." That's the wedding promise, and some will say it more closely resembles covenant than anything else.

So what is covenant? It is more than a contract and more than a promise: it is when two parties, or two people, agree to love each other, stand by each other, be faithful to each other, no matter what.

The covenant we have with God goes something like this: I will be your God and you will be my people.

What is interesting about this covenant is that God is the initiator: It came from God. It comes from God to Noah, then from God to Abraham, then from God to Moses. Then from

God to Mary who birthed the new covenant of flesh and blood. Then from Jesus, who said, “I will be with you always.”

“I will be your God. You will be my people.”

III

Now, I will tell you that I sometimes struggle to get my arms around covenant. Because there is something about covenant that is tied up in the idea of unconditional love. And though we throw that term around a great deal, both in our culture and in the church, I for one am skeptical about unconditional love. This may sound like cultural heresy.

Actually, unconditional love is a fairly new term and you won't find it in the Bible. I guarantee you my grandparents and the generation before them never heard of unconditional love. It gained popularity in the '50s and '60s from psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers and swept into the American psyche. The concept of unconditional love says that we should or can love one another without conditions. Regardless of what we receive in return. It is altruistic and idealistic. But I am skeptical that it is possible and just as skeptical that it is healthy or the right way to make a relationship strong and meaningful.

Here is what I wrestle with:

Love is a choice. The power to love, to give love, or to walk away from love is a crucial part of a relationship. If someone abuses you, or is cruel to you or your children, or trashes your sense of well-being or belittles you, or treats you poorly, I don't believe you are obligated to stay in that relationship. Yes, we are to love our neighbors and our enemies. That love is Agape love — which means we treat others with exceeding good will.

Saying “No” to hurtful behavior is not unloving. Rather, choosing to be with a person who respects you, who honors you, who treats you with kindness, and enriches your life is actually the first step to loving unconditionally; it prepares the ground for the possibility of love, even unconditional love, to flourish.

This is true with partners, lovers, friendships and other relationships. But what about parents and children? Unfortunately, some parents are rotten parents, and treat their children in unloving ways that can include physical and/or emotional abuse. Other parents are irresponsible and selfish. Should we ask those children to love their parents unconditionally?

And, of course, all of us, who are parents, want to love our children unconditionally, and we probably have the best shot at this than in any other relationship. But in parent-child relationships, don't we have expectations from our children about respect, how they treat us and others, about common decency, and right morality? I mean, if we are to be good parents, I believe that our parental love means having certain conditions and expectations that, when observed, enable our relationship to grow, mature and thrive... and more importantly, enable our children to grow, mature and thrive. There are conditions around such love.

IV

I am skeptical about unconditional love. Except, when it comes to God.

Because this story between God and humanity is a story of covenant making and covenant breaking. The reason there have been so many biblical covenants is that humans keep breaking our covenant, promises with God. We are not faithful to God.

And what does God do? God hangs in there! God kept initiating more covenants. God kept badgering all his people with love.

And the ultimate sign of God's covenant is made evident in the person and way of Jesus. Remember, they ignored Jesus, scoffed at him, questioned him, tried to trick and trap him, treated him badly, arrested him, flogged him and killed him.

And what did Jesus do?

"Father forgive them for they know not what they do." That's unconditional love.

This covenant we have with God is not a relationship between equals. God is God and we are not. God is great and good and we are not. God's love for us is... unconditional. Which is to say that God keeps loving us.

But this is what I know about relationships: the good ones, the meaningful ones, are the ones where we both have skin in the game, where we both are committed to loving each other and honoring each other — where we give something and receive something.

So yes, God loves us no matter what. But if we don't have skin in the God game, the relationship has no power. This covenant requires that we give something.

And when we do, the relationship thrives, the relationship has power, transforming power.