

## 1 *KEEPING THE COVENANT*

*Aberjhani, 21st century*  
*"Rainbows introduce us to reflections*  
*of different beautiful possibilities*  
*so we never forget that pain and grief*  
*are not the final options in life."*

### **A covenant with Creation itself**

**Genesis 9...** From the beginning of time God has sought to live in relationship with human kind. Here, in the story of Noah, a more formal relationship is established called a covenant. In such a relationship promises are made and conditions are established to ensure that the covenant is maintained. In the story of Noah God promises that the earth will never again be destroyed by water. Note that water is the primary element in all three readings.

**1 Peter...** The motif of water and the building of the ark bring us to baptism and what it means. The eight people saved by the ark prefigure the many now being saved through their baptism into Christ. Again the ultimate nature of Christ's death and resurrection are emphasised. Through baptism we are made part of the salvation and renewal wrought by God through these decisive events and now anchored in the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God.

**Mark 1:9-15** The sign of the new covenant would be water and the Spirit. **The water**

### **Genesis 9: 8-17**

Living, as we do, in an age of floods, the story of Noah carries fresh resonance. Were the biblical message one which took no account of the natural environment there would be a big question as to whether it could speak to a situation where the integrity of the earth itself is at stake. Highly significant, therefore, is the fact that the covenant made by God is not only with Noah, his family and descendants but also "with every living creature". The entire creation is embraced and upheld in the promise of God that never again shall the earth be destroyed by a flood.

The idea of covenant introduced in this passage is one which shapes the biblical text from beginning to end. It arises entirely from God's initiative. Noah and the world as a whole are simply on the receiving end of the amazing grace of God. It is unconditional, comprehensive and also permanent or everlasting. It is concerned with the ultimate realities that define our life and our world.

There is a promise - never again will all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood. And there is a sign - the rainbow set in the clouds that bears witness to the promise. It is a vivid sign, one which grips the imagination. It is when sun and rain, mercy and judgement, come together that we see the rainbow. Against the gloom of the cloud stands the glory of the rainbow, assuring us of the grace of God even when we are amidst the storm.

## 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."

## Psalms 25:1-10

*To you, O God, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.*

**Make me to know your ways, O God; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O God, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O God! Good and upright is God; therefore God instructs sinners in the way. God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble God's way. All the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God's covenant and God's decrees.**

## 1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous,

in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you — not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

### **Mark 1:9-15**

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

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

However, Valerie Bridgeman Davis introduces the season of Lent with the observation that during Lent, in our efforts at spiritual discipline, we might learn more important lessons, about "human nature and God's graciousness." She speaks of the internal struggle, about what happens inside us, because our inner life deserves and demands our attention and time. However, she cautions against a narcissism and an individualism that would focus on ourselves and forget the world around us: "The fast that only seeks to heighten our personal piety is not as desirable as the fast that will call us into prophetic action" (*New Proclamation 2009*).

And that may strike just the right note for our Lenten disciplines. The world does not encourage us to tend to our inner spiritual life, in fact, it does everything it can to distract us from such efforts. If Lent inspires us to focus

our energy and attention on our relationship with God, perhaps we will indeed draw closer to God, and when Lent is over, we'll want to stay in this new place. Or perhaps we will discover that we have made room for God right where we are.

The psalms are a good companion for us as we set out into the Lenten wilderness. Thousands of years later, our hearts respond to the words, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul, O my God, in you I trust," as well as "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness." And yet we also look around and feel pressed down and wonder why others are against us, or why people are treacherous, or why violence rules in the world. Perhaps we find that polite, evenly worded prayers don't work as well in that case as a raw cry of the heart that goes in more than one direction and speaks with harsh honesty.

The psalm's prayer for protection from enemies might seem a bit of a stretch for us today, when our faith rarely puts us in danger. What sort of spiritual enemies do you face? Daniel Schowalter suggests that "the greatest battle most Christians will ever fight is within themselves: a battle between self-interest and God's interest." We're in a war of sorts, caught between the call of God and the demands of a world that rewards "self-promotion," not weakness or humility (*New Proclamation 2006*). What does it mean, in this setting, to offer up one's soul? Is it a temporary offering, or is it a lifelong, wholehearted gift?

2           **Introduction:** What God has promised, God will make good on, no matter what the apparent obstacles, and our job is simply to set about cooperating with the promise-maker rather than with the obstacles. Promise has already been prominent in Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1, 4-5, 7, 13-16, 18-21; 16:10-12.

**THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH YOU**   **Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17:** God makes a covenant treaty (“covenant”- Hebrew *berit*) with Abram. In this covenant God says that he is making Abram the father of many nations and he renames him Abraham, meaning *father of many*. (God too receives a new name here... El Shaddai). It is their names that identify Abraham and Sarah as righteous before God, their true identities that God has given them. As God did for Abraham and Sarah, God names each of us for who we truly are. God undertakes to bless Abraham and his descendants “for ever”. God promises Abraham two things: descendants and land. They will possess the whole country Abraham had come to - Canaan. The seal of this covenant, acting as reminder and affirmation, was circumcision. Perhaps the most striking point of newness is God's promise to Sarah (17:15-16). Sarah is made a co-participant in the divine promise regarding a son and his descendants. She has a promise in her own right, not simply through Abraham. Humour and laughter accompany this most sacred arrangement appropriate under the circumstances!). Abraham and his family are surrounded with divine promises. They will not see the fulfillment of all of these promises in their lifetime (though a taste of fulfillment will be important, especially descendants). Faith will inevitably mean, for all of God's followers, living with promises as promises, often short of fulfillment.

**Psalm 22:23-31** Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about God, and proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that God has done it.

**Romans 4:13-25:** In this passage, Paul moves from this example of Abraham towards the conclusion that all people can enter into a saving relationship with God through faith. If the only way of knowing God is through the Law, then, he says, the promise made to Abraham, before ever the law had been given, would be meaningless. His point is that there is an important precedent for individuals entering into a saving relationship with God and he cites this to support the belief that gentiles, who are not of the Law, may come freely to faith in Christ.

**Mark 8:31-38** “... the cross is, in the Christian narrative, the ultimate obstacle to realizing the promises of God. God has promised a redeemer, a newly

anointed king of kings, a saviour to deliver the nations from sin and suffering. But that redeemer will be executed by the empire, and who could *really* be raised from the dead? The prospect is as impossible as ninety-year-old woman having a child with a hundred-year-old man. When we hear the promise of the resurrection, we know to fall on our faces in reverence: God is speaking to us! Yet surely we must also laugh incredulously; this is a foolish promise.”... Friday’s cross looms large over creation. Empires win every time, and no one ever comes back from the dead. Who could think otherwise? So we laugh, even as we fall to our knees in prayer and praise. We wait for Easter, when we witness the promises fulfilled, and our stubborn, doubt-filled laughter turns to the laughter of joy. **(Cameron Howard)**

3            **Lectionary texts**    The Ten Commandments or “ten words” form the requirements of a covenant treaty from God, in the style typical of covenants made by a sovereign monarch to vassal kings. The Commandments are the central requirement of the stipulations made known to Moses. They define the life to be lived by the Lord’s people in relation to God and in relation to each other. They are the basis on which the people of God are to remain faithful.

**Exodus 20: 1-17**    The Commandments are opened with a statement about the giving of them. It is Israel’s call to covenant faithfulness that is based on what God has done to free them from slavery and to make them God’s covenant people. God will further bless them if they follow the divine path and do as God wants. However, their deliverance from Egypt is not dependent on this obedience. God has already graciously brought their salvation about, but has more for them in the future.

**Psalm 19**            ...    *The law of God is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of God are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of God are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of God is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of God is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of God are true and righteous altogether.*

**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

**John 2:13-22**

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**BOUND IN COVENANT WITH GOD 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Exodus 20:1-17**

It is important that we seek to capture some of the positive force of the word "law":

- to be concerned about the law is to be concerned with the well-being of people
- the law preserves life
- the law instructs us and helps us to develop wisdom and maturity

- the law promotes good

A most basic claim we all should make regarding Old Testament laws is that these laws, both individually and in their entirety, are a gracious gift of God for the sake of the life, health, and well-being of individuals in community.

God's law takes into account what the people need for the best possible life. This means that the laws are not arbitrary; they are given in view of specific human needs. God's actions in the narrative which surrounds the giving of the law show that the law is not arbitrarily laid upon the people, but is given "for our good always, that God might preserve us alive" (Deuteronomy 6:24). The purposes of God for Israel evident in the narrative demonstrate that the law is fundamentally gift, not burden.

As Deuteronomy 5:33 puts it (in connection with the Deuteronomy version of the Decalogue): these laws are given to God's people "that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long on the land that you are to possess." God gives the Ten Commandments (and other laws) in the service of life. If for no other reason, they deserve our close attention, both with respect to (a) the laws as laws, and (b), the community concerns that led to their formulation in the first place. To obey the law (already given in creation) is to live in harmony with God's good intentions for the creation. The law is given for the sake of the best life possible; the law stands in the service of a stable, flourishing, and life-enhancing *community*.

The Ten Commandments have a fundamentally personal and inter-relational character to them. God introduces them with highly personal statements regarding what God has done on behalf of the people (cf. Exodus 20:2). Obedience to law is thus seen to be a response within a relationship, not a response to the law as law. In the larger narrative, readers are confronted with a God who personally interacts with Israel throughout every stage of their journey through the wilderness, and the law must be understood within that relational context.

4 Psalm 107 gives us a context by which to see and interpret the gospel reading: ‘Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.’

***Hesed*: the steadfast love of the Lord**

Note the sense of *hesed* in non-theological contexts. David and Jonathan made a covenant with one another, sealing their friendship (1 Samuel 18:1-3). Jonathan asked David to remember him and his family, no matter what the future might bring, saying “If I am still alive, show me the faithful love (*hesed*) of the LORD ... never cut off your faithful love (*hesed*) from my house ...”(1 Samuel 20:14-15). The meaning of *hesed* in this context is loyal love between two parties who have made a formal pledge through a covenant (see also 1 Samuel 20:8). It is also part of the vocabulary for describing the loyal love between two parties in a marriage (Jeremiah 2:2, “devotion”; and Hosea 2:19, “steadfast love.”

From the Hebrew *Hesed* we receive the Greek word *agape* which is the primary word in John 3:16. The word *agape* is also found in the second lesson for this day, in both noun and verb forms. Ephesians 2:1-10 speaks of the “great love (*agape*) with which he loved us ... ” (v. 4). The lesson as a whole is a commentary on the relationships between *God’s grace* (vv. 5,7,8) and the *human response* in faith (v. 8) all of which results in *good works* (v. 10). And here is the essence of a covenant relationship.

The single most important thing to notice about this verse is that God loved the world. God deeply loved the world that God created, and God longs for this creation to live. It is not only God's own people whom God will save, as in the Numbers story. It is the cosmos that God has loved, precisely by having given the only son, The purpose of God's having sent the Son was to save the world, just as the purpose of commanding Moses to erect a serpent on a pole was to save the people from death. The word ‘so’ in John 3:16 is not a reference to the degree of God’s love but to the kind of love God has... like the love depicted in the Numbers story where God heals (saves) any who look on the bronze serpent. The contrasts with the snake are clear. The snake healed a particular disease among a particular people. Jesus heals the whole soul for all who will accept him. The son came to save, to grant eternal life because God loved the world. That was Jesus' announcement: “I'm here because the God who loved you of old, still does. He sent me to tell you, to show you, to gather you up into life with him forever.” Here is the essence of the new covenant of grace.

Like the people in the story in Numbers, we have already been bitten or are in imminent danger of being bitten. Death is inevitable. When the bronze serpent is brought into the world, we look and live, or we do not. As Jesus comes into the world, we trust that which bears God's gracious love, or we do not. We receive eternal life or we continue to live apart from God, condemned.

These verses are embedded in a story where Jesus continues to engage, argue, and persuade people who are slowly transformed into believers. In John 3, Nicodemus is the seeker by night who is left in confusion, only to reappear in 19:39 to help care for Jesus' body. He has emerged from darkness into light over the course of Jesus' ministry.

**John 3:16** is a good interpretive lens into the gospel. John begins with echoes of Genesis (1:1) and the goodness of God's creation, the world, all that is in it. That note is sounded again so clearly here. For the sake of this world, God gives his most cherished beloved son. Any parent knows that the love for one's child is so great one might sacrifice oneself for a child. In this human experience we grasp God's self-giving love for us, giving us the incomparable gift of salvation, life forever through his beloved Son. In John's theological imagination, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are collapsed into a single movement of divine agency: Jesus exalted by God. Just as the Israelites were paradoxically required to look upon the very thing that brought death in order to receive life, so we are asked to look upon Jesus' "lifting up" in humiliating crucifixion and receive it as part of God's plan to glorify Jesus and save the world. The image of Jesus as the serpent "lifted up" is paradoxical, not simple.