

LENT I, 2018

Genesis 9.1-7

The Old Testament lessons for the season of Lent in this lectionary year focus on the covenants of the Old Testament. This week we read of God's covenant with the world, made in the time of Noah. Next week is the covenant God made with Abraham, through whom all the peoples of the world would be blessed. The Third Sunday of Lent is the covenant made at Mt. Sinai, after the Exodus from Egypt. The last Sunday of Lent speaks of the new covenant God would make with His people, prophesied by Jeremiah. All of this leads up to the Last Supper of our Lord, when Jesus establishes the new covenant by the gift of His own life to conquer sin, evil, and death.

Today we focus on what is called the Noahide covenant. But first we should say a few things about the concept of covenant in the Bible in general. It is a fundamental concept in the scriptures. A covenant is a pledge, a promise of faithfulness. The root word in Hebrew means "to bind oneself." In the Bible, God makes covenants. He binds Himself to His people and His people to Him. This is often expressed in the sentence, "I will be your God and you will be my people."

This is why Christians speak of a "covenant of marriage." The heart of marriage is a promise by which a man and a woman bind themselves to each other in a promise of faithfulness, for life.

Our culture is more familiar with the language of the "contract of marriage," which is something totally different from a covenant. A contract is an agreement to exchange goods or services. A covenant is a pledge of oneself. A contract is conditional and breakable. A covenant is not. One of the features of the decline of marriage in our culture is that we have allowed the language of business – contract language – to define marriage, instead of the teaching of the Bible. There is something quite different in saying, "I promise to be faithful to you, 'til death parts us" from "I promise to love you, as long as we are happy," or getting what we want from the marriage, or as long as it is convenient, etc.

So the first covenant God makes is with the world, in the story of Noah. You probably know the basics of the story. The whole earth had become wicked and sinful, to the point God regretted that He even made the human race. But Noah and his family are found to be righteous. God decides to start all over, to wipe everyone out but Noah and his family. He commands Noah to build an ark and fill it with a male and female of every species of animal on earth. (Here was a perfect opportunity to wipe out flies and mosquitoes and ticks. Why didn't Noah do it?)

God opens the heavens and it rains for forty days and nights. Noah and his family and all species of life on earth are in the ark. (Not a bad metaphor for the forty days of Lent.) When the rains end, Noah and his family come forth from the ark. They and the animals will repopulate the earth. And there God establishes His covenant with the earth. He promises never to destroy the earth again by a flood, even though, as God says, the human heart is resolutely set upon evil from one's birth. As a sign of this pledge of peace, God sets down His "war-bow." We call it a rainbow, and every rainbow is a reminder of God's promise.

Many of the ancient religions of the world had flood stories in their mythologies. The interesting thing is the religious message of the Bible's version of events. What did God's people see in this event? What did they hear God saying to them, in contrast to the other religions of their time? Likewise, what does this ancient story have to say to us, against the competing beliefs of our time?

The story is, first of all, an affirmation of the providence of God. In most ancient religions and philosophies, this world is seen as deficient, even an evil place. The goal is to escape it into some other-worldly place of peace and quiet. To this our scripture today says a resounding "No." God loves His creation. His promise not to destroy it affirms that no matter how bad the events of our time may be, no matter what disaster may take place, God still loves what He has made and will restore it to life. Even if the worst disaster should happen to this world, "eventually what Christ promised will come about, not because I wish it, but because God has promised it and, in the resurrection, God has shown

that He is powerful enough to deliver on that promise” (de Chardin).

Many of you here remember the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. It was the closest the United States and the Soviet Union came to nuclear war. My mother told me years later that on one day during the crisis she wondered when my father left for work if he would return in the evening.

Years later, in 1997, I was on a train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, Russia. Seated across from me was an older Russian couple. We struck up a conversation. I learned he had just written a book on the Cuban Missile Crisis – from the Russian view of things. He had been given access to classified documents of the Russian government from that time. His book was titled One Hell of a Gamble, because both Krushchev’s and Kennedy’s actions same so close to nuclear war.

“How close?” I asked him. “About three hours,” he replied. Three hours from the destruction of the world. Historians can write all they want about the skillful diplomacy on both sides that averted a nuclear nightmare. But I am convinced that larger, unseen spiritual forces were at work. I believe God, in whatever mysterious ways He does work, saw to it that the earth would not be destroyed. God was true to His promise, made in the days of Noah. As a great hymn sings, “God stood behind the shadow, keeping watch upon His own.” God’s providence works through the events of this world to preserve His good creation.

And, God’s providence does not apply just to the major events we see in the world at large, reported on the news (i.e., noise) channels. It is true for your individual life, too. Luther saw this in His explanation of the first article of the Creed:

“I believe God has created me and all that exists. He has given me and still preserves my body and soul and all their powers. He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil. All this He does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it. Therefore, I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.”

The Noah story is also about God’s making peace. In many religions of the ancient world, when the world is threatened by dangerous powers, a hero arises to restore order and establish peace. He does so by violence. The basic point the ancient myths made was that violence was necessary to secure peace. This theme is still found in many of our movies and TV shows today.

The Noah story shows that God tried once to conquer sin and evil by violence. But that way does not work. Violence only begets more violence. So God lays down His war-bow. He embarks on a different way to make peace with the world and reconcile the world to Himself. God conquers sin and evil by their opposite: the power of love. God lays down His weapon of war and makes a pledge of love to His creation.

God’s determination to reconcile the world to Himself leads to calling and making a covenant with Abraham and his descendents, through whom God will bring blessing to the world. It leads to a covenant at Mt. Sinai, where God makes His people a kingdom of priests to serve His purposes and gives them His teaching so they may walk in His ways. The covenant continues with God’s promise to King David, that one of his descendants would always rule over God’s people. God’s covenant promise eventually leads to a cross outside Jerusalem, where, as St. Paul writes (II Cor. 5), God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself; not by acts of violence, but by absorbing violence, sin, and evil in Christ’s body, taking it in and giving back love.

Nor does God’s covenant promise stop there. It takes place at the baptismal font, in the covenant God made with you in your Baptism. It is the sign of your salvation. And it happens right here, at the Table of the Lord, in receiving the bread and wine of the new covenant Jesus made in His death and resurrection, for the forgiveness of your sins and the sins of the world. Amen.