

SERMON TITLE: "Our Covenant with God: Rainbow Covenant"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 9:1-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 4, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday morning, I went early to McKay-Dee Hospital to get some lab work done that had been ordered by a doctor's office. I walked into the main entrance, got checked out by the person with the no-touch thermometer, and then went to the registration office. I answered a bunch of questions, handed over my insurance card, got the little plastic bracelet placed on my wrist, and received instructions about where to find the lab. After all that happened, the hospital employee said, "Maybe, before you get your labs done, you should check with your insurance company to make sure our hospital is in your network."

I do have a different insurance company this year than I've had in the past, but it's a big company, so I couldn't imagine any problem. But, following his suggestion, I made a phone call before I went down the hall to the lab. To my dismay, I discovered that my new insurance company does not consider McKay-Dee in-network. I was certainly glad that I was learning this information on a day when nothing was urgent and when I had plenty of time to work out another plan. And, fortunately, I hadn't lost any money. But, I left the hospital without getting my lab work done, and with a feeling that I had somehow been betrayed—like some kind of expectation had been disappointed, like some kind of promise or covenant had been broken.

Our human life is full of those kinds of assumptions, expectations, promises, contracts, and covenants we make with each other and with God. Sometimes our trust is well-placed, and other times we find out later that we should have read more of the fine print. Sometimes we get caught way off guard because—consciously or unconsciously—we have been predisposed to assume certain truths, and it takes a big jolt to get us to see the light about how things really are. Sometimes we may have been

dealt a bad hand, and we may never understand why we got the short end of the stick. Sometimes we have to acknowledge that the problem is on our side of the equation. We are the ones who haven't upheld our part of the bargain.

During this month of October, I want to talk about these relationships of trust, these unconscious assumptions and conscious commitments that we make. Specifically, I want to talk about our covenants with God. Covenant is a big theme in the Bible, and today, I invite you to begin with me by considering the rainbow covenant between God and Noah.

1—ORIGINS OF RAINBOW COVENANT

I think we're all pretty familiar with the story of Noah. I'm not sure, though, if you've ever given much thought to how early this story begins in the Bible and what led up to it. Genesis chapters one and two tell about God's good creation and God's desire that life would flourish on earth. But then, right away, things start to go wrong. Genesis 3 tells about the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Chapter four continues the saga of human failings by relating how Adam and Eve's son Cain murdered his brother Abel. Chapter six tells that the violence and "wickedness of humankind was great in the earth" (v. 5). Because humanity had broken God's plan and expectations, God came to regret having made human beings. So God decided to destroy humans and animals from the earth—all except righteous Noah, his family, and those animals Noah was instructed to bring onto the ark. Chapter seven tells about the rain that fell for 40 days and 40 nights. Chapter eight describes how the flood waters subsided and the wind helped dry out the land. When it was finally safe for Noah's family and the animals to disembark, God made a promise—a covenant—with Noah and his family.

Thus, we read in chapter nine, that God put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of this covenant. Never again would God destroy all the earth by water. The earliest times of earth and human history might have been characterized by wide swings between God's good creation and human wickedness. But now that God had pushed the reset button and called for a do-over—now that the expectations

were more clearly stated—there was a new opportunity for life to be more normalized. The fresh start didn't guarantee that humans would stay free from sin. And the rainbow didn't guarantee that God would never become angry and send some kind of correction. But as long as humans and God could stay in within the boundaries of covenant relationship, the rainbow would be the failsafe sign, the circuit breaker, to keep destruction from becoming too extreme. As indicated by God's instruction to Noah to build the ark, God never wanted to wipe out life from the earth. God's desire was that the earth would be well, and that living creatures would flourish. God's rainbow covenant was given as an everlasting sign of God's commitment for humans and other creatures to live well on a healthy planet.

2—APPLICATION OF RAINBOW COVENANT

With this review of Noah's story, we're now ready to ask ourselves what this rainbow covenant means for us today. There are two main takeaways that I see.

The first of these is that, even when all we see is rainclouds and floodwaters, God is still there providing us hope and assurance. With the pandemic, job losses, social unrest, and political conflict, this year has given us a lot to cope with. But, no matter what terrible things happen to us, no matter how dark the storm clouds look right now, God is on the side of life. God's contract, God's guarantee, and God's promises are that there will be better days ahead. God's rainbow covenant is that, somehow, some way, life will resume. Life will continue, always and forever.

Does that mean that life will always be easy for us? No. Does that mean we will always be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel? No. Does that mean God's rainbow will become fully visible to us before we die? Not necessarily. I think of those who become terminally ill. No matter how much they and their loved ones pray for healing, sometimes the answer only ever comes in that ultimate healing when death ushers us into eternal life. Those who grieve often feel like they are in a dark place, and they wonder if the sun will ever shine again. The pace is different for everyone, of course. But

eventually, in time, life and joy reappear. It's like a weed or tree shoot that pushes through a crack in the pavement. Life is resilient. Even after the most devastating disasters, God makes a way.

This summer, millions of acres have burned in California, Oregon, and Washington—as well as here in Utah. We've breathed some of that smoky air, and our hearts have ached for those who have lost their homes and entire communities. After a terrible fire, the landscape looks so devastated and barren. But maybe you, like I, have seen a wilderness area two or three years after a fire has burned. It's amazing, isn't it? All the little saplings and wildflowers that sprout up? When I was a kid in Montana, I often saw places that were thick with purplish-pink flowers we called Fireweed. I don't know if that was the correct name, but we called them that because those three-foot stalks with their happy blossoms grew in areas where the trees had burned down. It was as if they were standing tall in defiance of any effort to squelch life. They were showing their colorful faces as a way of proclaiming that, no matter what, life will go on. God is serious about this being an everlasting promise. This is the hope and assurance of God's rainbow covenant.

A second takeaway from this story of the rainbow covenant is that it takes two to tango. A covenant—even a rainbow covenant—requires balance and partners. God made a good creation, but it takes human cooperation to keep it that way. Like Noah, we have to align ourselves with God for the well-being of our families and every living creature on earth.

The Noah's Ark story is a very good one for our times because our earth is in a precarious balance right now with climate change. When there were small numbers of human beings on this planet, humans were mostly at the mercy of what the earth did to them. But now, with so many of us chopping down forests, burning fossil fuels, causing the extinction of species, and filling our land and oceans with trash—we are overwhelming our planet's ability to self-regulate. We've given our planet a feverish sickness that's endangering the global food supply and creating all kinds of geo-political and economic insecurities. Yes, God can and will do God's part to keep up the rainbow covenant, but if

we're doing everything in our power to destroy it, then we may be working our way out of the covenant agreement. The life that God preserves may not be ours.

Covenants are partnerships. So we have to ask ourselves, "Are we doing our part?" That's how we participate in God's rainbow covenant.

CONCLUSION

While I was on vacation in July, I read a book called *The Sun Does Shine*. The true story was written by and about Anthony Ray Hinton, a black man who spent nearly 30 years on death row in Alabama for crimes he didn't commit. His initial charges and many appellate judgements were all decided against him based on false testimony, racial biases that presumed his guilt, and systemic injustices that denied the resources to mount a fair and effective defense. His innocence was eventually proven, and, in 2015, he was set free.

Can you imagine what an ordeal that would be? Thirty years of watching, hearing, and smelling other men on your cell block burn to death in the electric chair—all the while knowing that you were going to suffer the same fate for something you didn't even do? It was incredible that Ray was able to keep hope during all those years. But he did, in part because of his faith in God. It never was easy, and many times during those almost 30 years, Ray was on the brink of absolute despair. But, eventually, the sun did come out and shine again, showing color and joy in a rainbow covenant of life.

Whether it's a legal injustice, a natural disaster, a pandemic, a relationship betrayal, a health tragedy, mental illness, or a financial crisis—we all have experienced or could experience some very dark storm clouds and some rain that never seems to stop falling. But the good news is that God's desire and commitment is for abundant and everlasting life. If we choose, we can be partners in that rainbow covenant.