

“God’s Covenant With Humanity & the Animals”

Genesis 8:20-22, 9:8-17

April 23, 2023

3rd Sunday of Easter

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This morning, continue in our series in Genesis, looking at Genesis 8:20-22 and 9:8-17 - the text is printed on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along there.

Noah and his family and the animals have spent over a year in the ark. They have floated on the waters of the flood that brought destruction and death to the whole world, and now, after the waters have recede, the ground has finally dried up, and God has sent Noah and his family and the animals out into a new world brought into existence by his judgment.

And in this passage, we read of what takes place after these things. First, Noah offers a sacrifice. And then God, in response to Noah’s sacrifice, makes a covenant with Noah and all of his posterity and also with the animals and all of their posterity as well.

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word. It is more to be desired than gold; even much fine gold. It is sweeter also than honey; sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb.

*20 Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. 22 While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”*

*8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."*

*12 And 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: 13 I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 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. 16 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." 17 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."*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

All of us are, at times, I think, tempted to believe that God is capricious. That he is arbitrary. That he is inconsistent.

But the living God, the God revealed to us in the Scriptures is none of those things.

No, the God revealed to us in the Scriptures is faithful. He is constant. His love and strength and grace is something we can depend on — all the time.

And one of the primary ways that the Scriptures reveal God's faithfulness and dependability is by means of his covenants.

Now, there is but one overarching Covenant of Grace, a covenant made between God himself - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to bring about the redemption of the human race.

But that one overarching covenant has multiple administrations — and this covenant that God makes with Noah in our text this morning (and also, as we'll see, with the animals) is the first explicit covenant in the Scriptures — to be followed by God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, God's covenant with Moses and the people of Israel in Exodus 24, God's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, and then, finally, the New Covenant that God establishes in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

These five covenants are, in many ways, the backbone of the Bible, the line that traces through the Scriptures the continued and unfolding faithfulness of God. And as such, our text this morning is an important one — not only in its immediate context, but in terms of understanding the rest of the Biblical story, and indeed, our world today.

Our text this morning begins with Noah's first action after departing from the ark. There are a lot of things that Noah might have done after leaving the ark — he and his family constituting the only eight living people left in the world.

Noah might have looked for a water source. Noah might have sent his sons to scout out some fruit trees, or a likely place to plant some crops. Without a doubt, Noah did do those things in time.

But the first thing Noah did after leaving the ark was to build an altar and offer a sacrifice to God.

And what a sacrifice he offered! Genesis 8 tells us that Noah *"built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar."*

This was a huge sacrifice and must have taken a long time to accomplish.

And with every animal, every bird, that Noah put to death, he was symbolically and ritually communicating to God his understanding that he and his family, because of their sin, lived under God's just sentence of death, and it was only because of God's free grace and mercy that they, and they alone, had been spared in the flood.

God accepts Noah's sacrifice, and in his own free grace and mercy, he pledges that he will never again destroy every living creature as he did in the flood. And even more than that, the Lord promises that instead of destroying the earth, he will sustain it: *"While the earth remains,"* he says, *"seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."*

Both of these aspects of this covenant are important.

God is not only pledging to *not* destroy human and animal life as he did in the flood, he is also pledging, come what may, to preserve life, to preserve day and night, to preserve the seasons, to preserve the rain and the sun, to preserve all that is necessary on this planet to sustain human and animal life.

Notice that God's covenant here is not dependent upon anyone but himself. It is not related to humanity maintaining some level of righteousness or avoiding a certain level of wickedness. This covenant is pure grace. It is completely at God's initiative. It is unconditional.

And this, beloved, is a fundamental aspect of the character of our God. He is kind and gracious and patient, even to those who hate him.

As our Lord Jesus makes clear in his teaching in the sermon on the mount, God, because of his covenant with Noah here in Genesis, makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on both the just and the unjust — he preserves the life of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Think about what that means for a moment. Think of all the people down through the centuries since this covenant was made, who have hated God — either explicitly, in their words, or implicitly in their actions.

Men of violence, men of corruption, men of greed and bitterness, men with no regard for human life or God's authority.

And yet God has loved and been gracious to them all.

He has preserved the seasons and the rain and the sun and the growing of plants and the production of oxygen and every single little thing that goes into the continuance of life on this planet — all this, for the benefit of men and women who have hated him and rebelled against him.

This is the character and the nature of our God. And this is why he calls us to love our enemies — because he has loved them first, and he loves them still.

Even now, even today, he makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine on both the just and the unjust — he continues his covenant that he establishes here with Noah.

And then, in Genesis 9, we discover that God's covenant in this passage is not only with Noah — it is made specifically with the animals as well.

In verses 9 and 10 of chapter 9, God says to Noah and his sons: *“Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth.”*

God, by his own promises, binds himself in a covenant not only with humanity, the unquestioned crown of his creation, but also with all the animals that came out of the Ark with Noah.

In other words, God's covenant here in Genesis 8 and 9 is established not only with men and women and children, but God also makes a covenant with the lions, with the bears, with the sheep, with the eagles, with the lizards, with the bluejays, with the alligators, with the deer, with the rabbits and every other creature he has made.

I don't know about you, but I find this aspect of the Noahic covenant fascinating.

Beloved, animals matter to God. Animals are important to him.

And that's been apparent all throughout this whole narrative of Noah and the flood.

The reason God commands Noah to build such a huge ark is because God cares about animals.

If God had cared only about humans and preservation of human life, Noah could have built a much much smaller vessel of salvation.

But the ark, the vessel of God's salvation in the midst of his judgement, had to be very large, because it had to include room for all the animals as well.

And God's spirit brings the animals to Noah from all the corners of the earth, so that he can provide safe shelter for them on the ark.

And God's spirit dwells with the animals during that whole year they were on the ark, keeping them safe, making sure the lions didn't eat the sheep, keeping them alive and ready to re-enter the new world that awaited them.

And now God intentionally names and includes the animals here in his covenant with Noah after the flood. He will preserve and protect them as well.

Two points here that I want to make about God's care and concern for animals.

The first is that God's concern for animals all throughout this narrative is a demonstration of God's commitment to the physical material of his creation.

Beloved, God loves his physical creation. He delights in it.

God loves the grace of a deer as it runs through the forest.

God delights in the color of the butterfly as it dances over a field of flowers.

God rejoices in the majesty of the great blue whale as it surfaces on the face of the ocean.

As Psalm 104 tells us, God watches over the life of each animal. He gives them their food in due season. He makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on them as well.

And his covenant with the animals here in Genesis 9 is a dramatic confirmation of the physical nature of the redemption that he will one day bring through his Son on the last day.

Given what the Scriptures teach here and elsewhere, it is impossible for me to comprehend a new heavens and a new earth that will not include the animal kingdom as well.

The second point I want to make is that God's love for animals teaches us that it is good for us to love animals as well.

Whether it's the wild animals in nature that we observe from a distance, or the domesticated animals we bring into our homes to share our lives, it is good and right for us to love animals, and to care about animals, and to find joy in animals.

When we do these things we are reflecting the very character of God.

And that means that if any of you children are thinking about what you might want to do one day with your lives, and one of the things you're thinking about is working with animals, whether that's as a veterinarian who cares for animals or a scientist who studies animals or a farmer who raises animals, I want you to hear from your pastor that those are all godly and righteous vocations.

As you get older, don't let anyone ever tell you that an occupation that involves working with animals isn't "spiritual" enough. Because when we love and care for animals, we are imitating God himself.

The final thing I want to look at this morning is the sign of this covenant that God makes with Noah and the animals.

In verses 12 and 13, God says: *"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: 13 I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."*

The sign of God's covenant with Noah, is of course, the rainbow. God nearly destroyed his creation because of the sin of humanity. But, in response to the sacrifice offered by Noah, God's wrath against the earth has been turned away, and he has hung up his bow in the clouds.

And notice that the sign of the rainbow isn't for us, so much as it is for God.

He says in verse 16: *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.*

The rainbow is put in the clouds for God as a memorial so that, in his grace, he will see it and remember and keep his promise to us, his creatures.

Now, of course, God doesn't "need" the rainbow in order to maintain his covenant.

But he establishes it as a living sign of his promise, so that we will be assured of his continuing faithfulness, his continuing remembrance to be faithful to preserve his creation, never again to destroy it as he did in the flood.

In our modern age, of course, the rainbow has been co-opted as a symbol.

One of the oldest and most important of Christian images has been, in a very real sense, stolen by our culture and used as a sign of pride and rebellion against God's moral authority — and I think that's deeply sad and troubling.

But I will also say this. In God's providence, I think that it's no accident that the rainbow in particular is the symbol that has been co-opted in a manner that our culture that largely has used as a means of rebelling against and even mocking God.

Because the rainbow is the divinely chosen sign of God's benevolence, God's grace and God's kindness and God's patience toward all of the human race, even toward those who mock him and hate him.

Beloved, it is impossible for the rainbow to be corrupted. People may think they're doing that, but they're not. Because the rainbow is God's chosen sign, not man's.

And in particular, the rainbow is sign of God's covenant that he chose so that he would see it and remember his everlasting covenant between himself and every living creature on the earth - no matter how sinful, how wicked, how rebellious.

And so, the next time we see the rainbow being used in ways that are unrighteous, perhaps we should be reminded of this covenant that God made with all living flesh, how he loves all of his creation, sinners that we are, and remember also the words of our Lord Jesus, who taught us to be like our Heavenly Father, saying:

*43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.