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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2009

Genesis 9.8-17
Mark 1.9-15

**People of the Covenant:
Remembering the Rainbow**

God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I made between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. —Genesis 9.12

The season of Lent is the season when we prepare for Holy Week and Easter. Traditionally during this season we prepare by hearing anew several stories about the ministry of Jesus. The lectionary readings that we read each Sunday will allow us to hear those stories from the Gospel of Mark, but I would like us to focus our attention elsewhere. This year, I would like us to pay special attention to the Old Testament readings that are part of this season—readings that give us a thumbnail sketch of the whole grand story of the Old Testament and God’s relationship with the people called Israel. By focusing on these Old Testament readings we by no means ignore Jesus, since the Old Testament points to the New Testament, and since a firm understanding of Jesus is impossible without a firm understanding of that which preceded him in the Old Testament.

There is a rubric or theme that will help us to better understand our Lenten Old Testament texts. All of the readings for the next few weeks have to do with a special kind of relationship between God and God’s people—they have to do with covenants. Because of this, I have entitled this series, “People of the Covenant.” Nothing is more distinctive about ancient Israel than its covenantal relationship with God. Truly they were a people of the covenant. As we look at that people of the covenant, it is my hope that we will begin to see that, through Jesus Christ, we have become people of the covenant as well.

A covenant is an agreement or a promise that takes place between two parties—each party pledging him or herself to do something for the other. The idea of the covenant between the God of Israel and his people is fundamental to the meaning of the Old Testament. In the pages of the Old Testament, we encounter covenant everywhere—between God and Noah, between God and Abraham, between God and Moses, between God and David—just to name a few. We also read of covenants between human beings and other people. Jesus takes this conception of covenant a step further when he shows that in his life and death we have the perfect covenant between God and humans. In that covenant, instead of offering our own righteousness in exchange for the mercies of God, we receive a free gift of divine forgiveness through which our righteousness may be made perfect. This covenant in Christ is called the New Covenant, or as we more commonly translate the Greek, the New Testament. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. We don't want to start at the end of the story—in fact, the whole purpose of this sermon series is to start at the beginning.

The story of the Bible begins with an extended account of the origins of the human race and the spread of human sinfulness into the world that God had created. That is the whole subject matter of the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis. The stories of those chapters are familiar to us—perhaps because we've learned them in church school, perhaps because, if we've ever tried to read the Bible starting at the beginning, we've usually gotten at least that far!

When we read Genesis 1-11, we should see not just a strange primeval world—we should see our own world. We should see a world that was created good and which still contains much that is good. We should also see a world that has been distorted and twisted by human pride and greed. We should see a world where God's creatures carelessly rush to obtain knowledge that is forbidden them—whether that knowledge be called the apple or the atom. We should see a world where brother rises up against brother and where bloodshed becomes the norm—whether that brother be called Cain or Adolph. We should see a world that would make even

the most patient God angry, a world that *deserves* to be destroyed. It is into this very world that God comes to make covenants.

God's covenant with Noah comes after the flood, after the fierce exercise of God's wrath upon humankind. It is the first covenant in the Old Testament, and it is different from all of the others in many important respects. First of all, it is a very one-sided agreement. God promises never again to destroy the earth by flood. Noah promises nothing.

We do well to ask ourselves what has changed on the human scene that allows God to make such a promise. Does God expect that evil will no more find its way into his world? If that's what he expects, then we have ample history to prove him wrong. What changed is not the goodness of the human race after the flood, but God's attitude toward that human race. The covenant with Noah is not about a revolution in human behavior, it is about a revolution in the heart of God. God promises that never again will he destroy his creation—*no matter what happens*. One wonders, looking back, if God knew just what he was getting himself into!

God's covenant with Noah is in its form a covenant of divine forbearance. God promises *not* to do something—namely, not to destroy the world by flood. God promises, in effect, to cut us some slack. As a reminder of this covenant, the story tells us that God puts a rainbow in the sky.

The bow, symbolic of a weapon, is “hung up” in the sky, no more to be used. What's most interesting to me about today's story is the rainbow. God puts this rainbow in the sky as a reminder of his covenant never again to flood the world. It is, of course, a reminder for people, for us, of the unswerving love of God. But the wording of the text makes it clear that it was also intended to be a reminder *for God*. God too, it seems needed to be reminded of the covenant.

God's covenant with Noah is different from other Old Testament covenants in that it is not just with Noah, but with the world as a whole. God doesn't limit the promise to one particular group of people, as he will in future covenants. This promise is universal; it is for everyone—including the animals.

Because of this, the placement of this story in the Bible is very important. It comes after evil has entered the world through the fall of Adam and Eve, but it comes before God's specific saving actions with the people of Israel. By this placement of the covenant with Noah, the Bible tells us that however much evil there may be in the world, and however many specific things God may do to deal with that evil—behind and prior to it all is the abiding promise that *God will not give up* on his creation. That is not to say that God will always be happy with it, it is just to say that never again will God despair of the world so much that he would just as soon be rid of it.

So, the covenant with Noah is a covenant of divine forbearance. God promises *not* to do something. But this promise is really a promise of universal grace and love, since that is what motivates God to hold his hand. The covenant with Noah, even though it is only a covenant of divine forbearance, is the covenant of a free and gracious God—a God who pledges constancy to what will prove to be a long and stormy love affair with the human race.

When things on the human scene get bleak—when families hurt each other, when the morals of society fail, when the nations rage—when these things happen, we do well to remember the rainbow. And, I suppose, we do well to hope and pray that God remembers it as well, and that the “bow” will remain unused in the sky.

In the story of the rainbow, we have a clear statement of God's creative purpose for the whole universe, not just for the tiny band of people called Israel. Most of the rest of the Old Testament, however, occupies itself with that tiny people. But the story *begins* with the rainbow. When we remember that God has a purpose for the whole creation, then we are ready to see the very important part that a people called Israel are called to play in that purpose. From that people comes the one who plays the most important part of all. Next week, we'll begin to look at other, more specific covenants in the Old Testament. For now, we can just remember the rainbow.