

## Lent 1 Sermon Feb 21.21 Noah's Covenant by Pastor Kit Greaves, Christ Church Oshawa

Pray: Lord Jesus, as you endured the wilderness for forty days, may we take with us, through Lent, the courage to make our lives count for good. Amen.

I was so nervous I nearly dropped the rings. It was my first wedding as a young clergyman. I hadn't noticed it before but the bride and groom and I were standing at the front of the church over a large metal ventilation grate. When I asked for the rings, the little lace ribbon holding the rings was tied so tightly to the ring pillow that I couldn't get them off. In those days, I carried a jackknife and so I pulled the knife out and proceeded to cut my finger, then eventually free the rings. Thank God I didn't drop any rings down the metal grate. I licked the blood off my finger and proceeded with the vows.

Who knew weddings could be so dangerous! Becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable is a way of describing today's featured bible reading from the first book of the bible, Genesis, as we begin a new Sermon Series for Lent today on the theme of covenant.

Marriage vows are an ancient covenant, when, by God's covenant love, two become one. God makes us and God brings us together; the wonderful, joyful work of God. The sacramental sign of that inward grace of unity; the rings. There are other covenants we commit to: Real Estate deals, property agreements, our Last Will and Testament are covenants, each with their own sign, symbol or document. A covenant signals something binding, something important between two parties, part of society's fabric for ensuring trustworthy relationships, integrity. Covenants are shared promises that carry consequences if responsibilities are not met.

Covenants are highlighted throughout the season of Lent in Year B in the Revised Common Lectionary for the following reason: **covenants** between God and humanity provide the skeletal framework for the whole biblical story, the skeletal framework for human flourishing. Covenants reveal God's character and our deep human need. As the story of the bible unfolds, we see God is a covenant making, covenant keeping, covenant fulfilling God;

The goal of the Sermon Series in Lent is to see the work and person of Christ in light of Covenants in the Old Testament, to highlight aspects that we have possibly overlooked and deepen our walk with Christ through Lent. Christ's work is intimately related to and fulfills each of the four major covenants (with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and David) that God initiated in the Old Testament. Covenants are about God's activity and intention to redeem us. Even if we forget, God remembers his covenant and so re-orient us to true north, our true self.

The story of Noah and the ark is one of the more disturbing and difficult stories of the scriptures.

No children's play set of Noah includes the multitudes of people and animals destroyed and floating dead in the waters surrounding the Ark – these images are too graphic and pointed because they speak to us of a God who seeks a new beginning only nine chapters after he created the world. While such genocide grates 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities, we must not be too quick to judge the mindset

and culture of the Ancient Near East. By that method, Noah might likewise be horrified and stand in judgement of our modern destruction of entire species of creatures by 21<sup>st</sup> c consumerism and greed, our or mistreatment of people based on race or economic status.

Three things we learn about God's covenant with Noah.

**First**, God initiates the covenant: the covenant with Noah is completely one-sided; God offers it without strings. You and I and our cats and dogs have to do precisely nothing to receive it. It just *is*. And here are its parameters: first and foremost, no more floods (Gen. 9:11). The memory of a massive great flood was nearly ubiquitous in the Ancient Near East among the surrounding nations (except in Egypt where there is no known story of a flood), so for God to promise no more floods was a great relief. It came because of human evil, and though that evil still is in evidence (see Gen. 8:21), God foreswears that means of destruction.

**Second**, Noah's Ark story is motivated by God's covenant love. The sign of the end of floods is both beautiful and richly symbolic. If you haven't seen the beautiful, wall-sized mural in the basement of Noah's Ark by artist and parishioner Ron Backwell, you have another reason to visit our Thrift Shop downstairs! "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" (Gen. 9:13-15). The "bow" is precisely the word for the bow of war, notched with the arrows of killing. But now YHWH, God, hangs the war bow in the clouds as a sign that the covenant between God and the earth is still in force. This charming image is apparently borrowed from their Canaanite neighbours, since in their mythology, the god Baal hangs his war bow in the clouds after the earth's creation. For the Hebrews, however, the hanging up of God's war bow reveals a central aspect of God's character, evident in the Hebrew word *Hesed*. *Hesed* means loving kindness, loyalty.. The rainbow which has served for centuries as a symbol of hope, fertility, promise or diversity (from the LGBTQ community to the Cursillo renewal movement *De Colores*), is a clear and visible sign to all that, even if we fail, God will keep his promise and be true to covenant love.

**The third thing** we learn The rainbow is there for God to see and remember his covenant. Oh, we can look at it and enjoy a rainbow or be amazed at a double rainbow, and it will help us remember the covenant that God has offered, and it is a lovely sign of the end of nearly every rainstorm. But in fact, the bible says that the bow in the clouds is for God to remember! It says that no fewer than three times in this text. The cloud bow is the string tied around God's divine finger, the notification 'ding' on his phone; not today. When God sees the bow, God will be reminded that floods for human sin are no longer an option; God will strive to make a way for all creatures to thrive in the cosmos.

There are three applications of this teaching on Noah's Covenant.

**First, Noah's Covenant is a clear call to environmental theology.** We must consider how we love the planet, the world, the Greek word is 'cosmos.' Worldometrics estimates the world population in Feb 2021 as 7.8 billion people and will grow 9.8 billion in thirty years. Human behaviour points toward the planet's potential biological if not geological failure and eco-system collapse, so we must dedicate ourselves to its success and ultimate livability for all. One could easily say that Genesis 9:8-17 is the quintessential biblical passage for a full and rich environmental theology: God loves the cosmos and works for its ongoing success and bids all those who love God to love the cosmos, too,

and to join God in that good environmental work. Compost bag for backyard compost. Seed planting for garden has begun.

**Second application is growing in discipleship:**

When God speaks of his covenant relationship with his people throughout the Bible, the language is often that of marriage. God is like a groom. God's people are like a bride that he loves and is devoted to. In response, God desires that his people respond to his loving devotion with fidelity. Isaiah 62:5 says, "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." That is the kind of love that God and His people are supposed to have for one another forever. Disciples trained in God's word and covenant and Christ's kingdom have a way of adding value, uplifting others and serving humbly, that permeates good wherever they go.

**The third application of the Noah Covenant is about anti-racism.**

The sad truth is that we wreak horrors on ourselves and others by our prejudice, whether we are aware of our own blindspots or not, and it's God's covenant love and God's continuing to gaze at a rainbow that stays God's hands. We would do well to follow God's example.

Think about life in our world at the moment and how God's heart must despair at our inhumanity: how people are being treated in Myanmar and Hong Kong, Refugee Camps worldwide, children driven by their parents into prostitution because of poverty and demand. God must be looking at the rainbow!

21 Coptic Christians beheaded by members of the Islamic State.  
God must be looking at the rainbow!

George Floyd gets killed by a zealous police officer with a knee to his neck.  
God must be looking at the rainbow!

The vision of God's Kingdom is one where we step into God's Hesed, his covenant of loyalty and love, where all races, tribes and nations are welcomed and made one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28), where barriers are broken down and all are full citizens of the household of God (Ephesians 2:17-21) and where all are invited to contribute the gifts and glory of their heritage (Revelation 21:26). Yet, as racialized members of our communities can attest, and as has been made painfully visible in the events of this past year, our society and even our Church fall, far short of this goal. Canadians, particularly those of European decent, may be tempted to look at racial tensions in the U.S. and congratulate ourselves that we live in a diverse and tolerant society, but the experiences of racialized people in Canada do not bear out this assumption.

Nor can we claim that our Church is free of racist attitudes and the systems that entrench and perpetuate them. Black clergy in our Diocese of Toronto can attest, not only to being racially profiled

in shops but to encountering surprise and discomfort when people realize this black clergy person is the senior priest in charge. Nor does our leadership fully represent the ethnic and racial diversity of our Church.

However, there are signs of positive change. You can read more about this on the diocesan website [Toronto.anglican.ca](http://Toronto.anglican.ca) under the Social Justice Vestry Motion and in our Vestry Report due to be emailed tomorrow.

If you're looking for a book to read during Lent to deepen your faith in spirit and in action, consider one of these: Robin diAngelo's *White Fragility*, Desmond Cole's *The Skin We're In*, or the late Rev. Dr. James Cone's, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Check today's post.

One further opportunity happening this week. We are invited to participate in a Black History Month Discussion group on Zoom this Tues night Feb 23, 7 pm focussing on Viola Desmond and the role of black Canadians in advancing racial understanding. Our host is the Rev Shelly Pollard, Incumbent of St Martin's Bay Ridges Anglican Church in Pickering. A Zoom link is available to any who would email me today.

In Noah's Ark, we see the rescue of a single family and the animals on a floating zoo as a comfort in the midst of an uncomfortable reality. The story of Noah's Ark teaches us three things about covenant: God initiates the covenant, God is motivated by *Hesed* -covenant love, and the rainbow is there primarily for God to remember his covenant.

Ultimately, Noah's Covenant points ahead to Christ's covenant. The waters of the flood and the ark that saves Noah's family and all creatures, foreshadow the waters of baptism of Christ and the rescue he accomplishes through his death and resurrection, for all who would repent.

St John Climacus wrote, "To repent is not to look downwards at my own shortcomings, but upwards at God's love; it is not to look backwards with self-reproach but forward with trustfulness, to repent is to see not what I have failed to be, but what, by the grace of God, I might yet become."

Like a ring at a wedding is the bow in the clouds. Covenant made, covenant kept. Even if the rings fall off, God will keep on.

A question you might take with you through Lent: Do I have the courage to take my true self and make that count for something for good, for this world?

What a friend we have in Jesus.

Ash Wed dust. I am going to die one day.

The TV ad for a candy bar with a kid on the bus; his mom's on one side, a young pre-teen sits alone on the other seat, looking disheveled, hiding her tears. You can sense the boy wondering if he can share a piece of his candy bar with the girl. He's comfortable in that moment with being uncomfortable about what to do with his candy bar. He looks at his mother and she approves. The boy opens to a piece of the candy bar and looks at the girl. Through her tears, she smiles. A connection. A moment of grace.

A recent study by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) has found that, although Black people make up less than 9% of the population of Toronto, they are "grossly over-represented" in cases of discretionary arrests for low-level offences, as well as in police use of force, including fatal shootings. Another report from the OHRC found that between 2013 and 2017, a Black person was nearly 20 times more likely than a white person to be fatally shot by police in Toronto. 1 Indigenous people make up only 5% of Canada's population, but more than 30% of incarcerated individuals in Canada.2 Several school boards in the GTA have faced inquiries into their systemic inequitable treatment of racialized students. These are all present realities within the most racially-diverse region of Canada.