

LIVING IN COVENANT: THE EARTH

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on February 18, 2018 (First Sunday in Lent)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

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: 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; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 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." 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."

- Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

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The season of Lent has begun. Many of you were here for a beautiful Ash Wednesday worship service this past week. Today is the first Sunday in Lent – the 40 days (not counting Sundays) that precede Easter Sunday – the most important celebration in the Christian church. The season of Lent is an annual reminder or sharing in the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, as the story is told in the gospel reading for today. As that time in the wilderness was for Jesus, Lent is a time for us to discern or renew our mission to proclaim God’s good news, and to wrestle with the temptations that continually try to turn us from that essential mission.

The lectionary Old Testament lessons for these next five Sundays are almost all about various covenants that God has made in our faith history. And so my sermons for Lent will be about the general theme of “living in covenant.” Covenant is a key theme in the biblical story, and it is essential for our life together as Christians, as members of this church, and as a part of the United Church of Christ.

A covenant is a committed relationship in which promises are made by one party to another. It is more than a contract or business relationship – it is a long-term commitment. Although a covenant can be broken, there is at least the intention of keeping it, even if it is violated by one or more parties. That may require some recognition of failure, some confession, and repentance. The covenant may have to be renegotiated. But the intention is to keep the relationship going.

Ancient kings made covenants with one another. Covenants are familiar to us in other ways as well. Marriages are covenant relationships, with two people traditionally promising to love one

another and remain faithful to each other, regardless of health or economic conditions, until death parts them. Sometimes those relationships last for 75 years or more; sometimes they don't. But they start with that intention.

Being a member of a church is a covenant relationship. Church members typically promise to attend worship when possible, support the church with their gifts, and love one another through the joys and sorrows of life.

Covenants can be a challenge to live, because they involve mortal, fallible human beings who sometimes are concerned more about their own desires and freedom than the relationship. People sometimes disappoint us and even make us angry. Living in covenant usually takes commitment, patience, grace, and great love.

Our Old Testament lesson for today tells about the first covenant that God made in the biblical story. We often think of the story of Noah and the Ark as a cute story about a floating zoo, but it is actually a very sad story. Human wickedness and evil had increased on the earth so much that God began to regret ever creating humans. If you think things are bad now – they have been bad for a long time! So God decided to do what many people have tried to do over the millennia – let's get rid of all the bad people and keep only the good ones. Sounds like a simple idea, right? So God found the best family on the earth – Noah and his wife and three sons and their wives – and decided to save them by having Noah build a great boat. Noah was not perfect – far from it. But he was the best at that time.

And so Noah built the ark and took his family into it, along with one pair of every kind of land animal (or seven pairs of some animals). And then God sent a great flood that covered the entire earth. It not only destroyed all human life on earth, but also all the land animals and cattle of various kinds because even they had been corrupted by human wickedness. So God did a global restart – starting the creation over again with the survivors on the ark.

It's a far-fetched story, to be sure. How did they keep the lions from eating other animals? But the point of the story is that it didn't work. It turns out there is no such thing as good people or evil people – there are only people who are a mixture of both. Soon after the flood subsided and the passengers embarked from the ancient cruise ship, Noah and his family and their descendants returned to their wicked ways. As soon as the flood ended, God regretted the act of destroying all life on earth.

And then God made a covenant – to never try that approach again. To never again destroy the earth by flood (other options may be left open). God made this covenant with all humankind and with all the animals of the earth. It is interesting that this was a one-sided promise. God did not require that people or animals be good, or promise anything in return. God just promised and made this universal covenant. It seems that God can make mistakes, and learn and grow!

And then, God sealed the covenant with a reminder. Covenants are often sealed with symbolic reminders. When a couple gets married they often exchange rings. In this case, the covenant was sealed with the rainbow. Whenever it rains and the rainbow appears, God remembers the

covenant and the promises, and stops the rains before the entire earth floods (although sometimes it takes a while to shut off the water, like when the Big Thompson floods).

I think this is helpful to remember whenever there is a huge hurricane that threatens to flood entire cities. Almost every time it happens, some preacher will claim that God is using the hurricane and flood to punish someone for their wickedness – usually gays or liberals. I think those claims forget the Noah story – and God’s covenant promises.

But what I want to suggest today has profound implications for all of us – and for this church. The story says that God made that covenant with all of Noah’s descendants. That includes all of us, as well as our children and grandchildren and countless generations to come. And it also included all animals on the earth – birds, domestic animals, wild animals.

And even though God made that covenant unilaterally – not asking or requiring us to do anything in response – if God is committed to not destroying the earth or life on it, should we not make the same commitment? To not do anything that might harm or destroy the earth or its living creatures – both now and in the future?

For many centuries, the earth was seen as an inexhaustible treasurehouse of resources: air, water, land, living creatures, minerals for energy and technology. Ancient people probably believed there was no way they could ever damage or deplete the earth. Although there was already some realization that the soil could not be used for growing crops year after year without replenishing it with nutrients, and giving it rest. The Old Testament of the Bible contains commandments that fields should be left to rest one year in every seven – God introduced people to the idea of sustainability.

But in recent centuries we have begun to understand that the earth’s resources are not inexhaustible, and are not impervious to damage. Air and water can get polluted, causing health problems for the living beings that depend on them. Soil can get depleted, so it no longer produces. Fossil fuels like coal and oil and natural gas that can be used to produce energy are limited, and their use can have unhelpful consequences. We have begun to understand that the earth is not a static, unlimited resource, but rather an intricate living system that at times has a remarkable ability to respond to stresses put upon it, and at other times is very delicate and easily thrown out of balance.

We have learned a great deal about the earth in the past few centuries, but there is still much that is not understood.

How do we care for this amazing gift – this planetary home on which we live, that we believe God has created and does not wish to destroy? Because our understanding about how all its systems work is incomplete, sometimes we can only make our best informed guess. These days there is a lot of concern about global climate change and whether it is caused by humans, and whether there is anything we can do about it. Political battles in our country are being fought over those questions. I don’t necessarily want to get into those arguments today, although as someone who was educated in the sciences, I tend to believe that the best information we have at this time suggests global climate change is happening and is caused – at least in part -- by

humans. That opinion may be based on incomplete information, and not all scientists agree with that conclusion, but well over 90% do, based on the best information we have at this time.

The story of Jesus in the wilderness says he was tempted by Satan during those 40 days. We are also faced with temptations on a daily basis, and this is one of them – the temptation to dismiss the problem as not certain, or inconvenient, or something we can't understand. There is the temptation to focus on the short-term consequences of making changes: what will happen to people who mine coal for a living, or who work in the petroleum industry, or need to drive in order to do their work? What will happen to jobs, to gasoline prices?

I suggest that we need to take a longer-term view, as God did when God made this covenant with the earth and its creatures. That covenant was made with Noah and his generation, and with all descendants to come. I believe we are also called to care not for the earth not just for the benefit of the present generation, but for generations yet unborn.

The Native American Indian Chief Seattle is credited with saying almost two centuries ago, “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.”

I would add as a theological perspective, we have been given the earth by God as a home and a gift – to be treasured and cared for.

And in trying to decide how best to care for the earth right now, I am reminded of the saying of the great biochemist Melvin Calvin, “The real creative trick is to get the right answer when only half the data is in hand, and half of it is wrong...”

That is the situation that earth science is in right now. There is much yet to be learned; what we have learned is flawed and incomplete. But we need to make our best effort with what we now understand.

Regardless of your personal opinions on what is happening to the earth right now and the best public policy about its use, we can embrace our own covenant with the earth -- loving and caring for it as best we are able, to keep from damaging or destroying it for future generations, just as God promised to do,

The season of Lent has for centuries been a time for Christians to observe the spiritual discipline of fasting – refraining from eating certain foods for a period of time. Maybe you grew up in a home where you did not eat meat on Fridays during Lent. That might be a good practice to revive – to fast this Lent from wasting energy, from throwing away food, from creating waste.

Living in covenant means realizing that we are not isolated individuals, but part of a larger community – a community of people and living things that we depend on, and that depend on us to act with care. Living in covenant with God means loving God and our neighbors -- the things that God loves. That means loving the earth, and the people and creatures that live upon it.

Amen.

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