

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today we are in a new season of the church year. This is the first Sunday of Lent! And there is something really special about Lent in the year of Mark, something you might not notice unless you pay very close attention. For each of the five Sundays of Lent, every reading from the Hebrew Bible will be about one of the five covenants that God has made with us. And every one of those covenants is about God's everlasting love for us, and for the world. Each one came to our ancestors at pivotal moments in their journey with God, separated from each other by hundreds of years and from us by thousands.

Today we're going to explore the story of that first covenant, which is to say we're going to explore the story of the great flood.

Now this story is one of the most important stories to our people. Parents decorate their nurseries with imagery of Noah's ark. It's in every Christian storybook, every children's Bible; it's a Sunday school classic! Even people who didn't grow up religious have heard this story and know it well. So this story looms very large in our collective cultural memory. But it's not so often that we think seriously about what this story means for us, what it reveals for us as we live our lives as people of God. And here at Wicker Park we have begun wondering how we can make this place, this church, a place for all – I wonder what will come up for us when we hold that question up against this story.

As is true so often, the story begins a lot earlier than our reading from the lectionary. In the beginning, God made the sea, the sky, and the dry land, and God made all the living things in the water and the air and the land. And God said, “it is good.” And then God made us, God made humanity, and God said, “it is very good.”

Adam and Eve had children, and their children had children, and their children had children. And so on and so on for ten generations – and then one day their great great great (x7) grandson, Noah, was born.

Ten generations! separating Adam and Noah. Wow.

And as God was looking at the world that God had made so very good, God saw pain and violence. Violence from people like us. The cruelty of people was great over all the earth, and every inclination of their thoughts was to benefit themselves at the expense of anyone and everyone else. God was sorry she ever made people – because all of this pain from all of the world *hurt*. So our brokenhearted God said, “I am going to wipe out all flesh, because the whole earth is filled with violence because of them. I am going to wipe them out. I will send a flood upon the earth, to make everything new again.”

But then God saw one family that did good. They lived with kindness and gentleness. In that family were eight people: Noah and his wife Naamah, and their three children and their children’s partners. And God said to Noah, “I am going to bring a flood onto the earth, to destroy everything under heaven that has my breath of life, my spirit. But if you want to, you

can use my cypress trees to build an ark. And if you want to do that, then I will send two of every living thing to you, so you can keep them on the ark, every bird of the air and creature of the ground, two of every species to keep them alive. And if you're alive, then I will make a covenant with you – with all of you.”

Noah said yes.

And the eight of them, Noah and Naamah and their children, built the ark. And then the rains came.

The story goes that on the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day, all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. Then Noah and Naamah and their children entered the ark, and every wild animal of every kind, every bird and every creature, everything under heaven filled with the breath of God, got on the ark with them.

At first it was like any rain, but the rain kept on coming. The puddles ran together and soon the water covered everything. When the creatures on the ark looked out into the rain, all they could see was water. It rained and rained. The waters swelled and tumbled and rolled and the ark raised up, up, up, drawn upon waves and into the sky – no longer a separation between sky and sea, no longer any dry land, no longer any created thing to be called good – except inside the ark.

It rained for forty days and forty nights. But God did not forget the

creatures on the ark. After forty days and forty nights, the rain stopped. And then....

God blew God's breath to dry up the waters. The holy breath of God sent down like a great wind over the surface of the sea and the bottom of the sky, and the waters began to dry up, and the ark came down lower and lower and lower.

Then Noah took a dove. He opened a window, and he held her carefully and sent it forth. It flew and flew, but there was nothing but water. Noah put out his hand and took the dove back into the ark.

Noah waited seven days. He sent the dove out again. It flew and flew. This time when it came back, it had a fresh olive leaf in its beak. Now there was something green and growing on the earth again.

Noah waited seven more days. He sent the dove out again. This time, it did not come back. It made a nest, and it stayed there.

The waters kept going down and down, and finally the ark came to rest upon the earth.

Then all of the creatures began to come out of the ark. And they were so happy to be on the earth again – because it was their home. Noah built an altar of the Lord, and all of the creatures gathered together around it. And when God saw the smoke come up to heaven, God said, "I will never

again curse the earth because of people, no matter how wicked or evil they are, nor will I ever again destroy every creature. As long as time endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.

Then God said to Noah, and Naamah, and their children, and all of the animals gathered with them, “I am establishing my covenant with you and all of your descendants. My covenant is with every living thing upon the earth – with all of humanity, and all the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the creatures of the land. This is an everlasting covenant. And this is a sign of the covenant that am making, between all of us, forever: in the same way that an archer puts away her weapon, I will hang my bow in the clouds forever. And when you see clouds and you see rain you will see my sign, my bow, hanging there, never to be used against you again, no matter what. This is my everlasting covenant, between me and all creatures.”

Whew.

What a story.

Now this is one of the great mythic stories, about the time before history was written. So, the level to which you believe that this story literally happened as written is... up to you. But regardless of the framing device, this covenant is a cornerstone of our faith. This *everlasting* covenant. With Noah and Naamah and all the creatures of the earth. It's not transactional – it's not a “you worship me, I'll protect you” thing, that's not

what's happening here!

This is God telling us who God is... and that God will always be with us... no matter how much we mess stuff up.

I wish I could say things have changed since the time of Noah, but we are still living in a brutal and violent world. It is so hard to keep going when your eyes are open to all the ways we hurt each other, and all the ways that trauma compounds over generations.

But... God made us a promise. God said that God wouldn't punish us for messing up. That instead God would stay with us, always, helping to lead us in the right direction – that indeed God would dwell among us, and not only that but would send us signs of God's presence and grace, signs we can see everywhere you look – signs like rainbows in the clouds, signs like church basements full of people supporting each other in sobriety, signs like crocheted hearts with the crisis hotline attached.

But what's most remarkable about this covenant to me is not that it's everlasting – because of course we know God keeps God's promises. It's that it encompasses all of creation.

You know, we often think of these stories as belonging to us as Christians, or at the very least, belonging to Jews, but at this point, Israel was not even a twinkle in anyone's eyes. Abraham and Sarah are eight generations from being born! This covenant predates all churches and all

nations and all manner of divisions. This covenant, with our God, was and is for everyone – for all creatures of the earth, sky and sea – including us, but including much more than us.

God made that covenant with us near the beginning of time, and it is an honor to be born into it – an honor we share with literally every person and every creature on this planet. That means that every person who comes through the doors of this church for any reason, for any length of time, whether to worship or dance or sing or do karate, is our sibling by blood, through our ancestors Noah and Naamah, and should be shown all the love and tenderness we would give to our own households.

Over these next few weeks we will hear about four more covenants that God has made with the members of the great family – which is to say, with all of us. We focus on these covenants and God's promises to us during Lent because they give us something real to hold onto while we wander through the wilderness. These stories place us within a long line of people doing their best, falling short, and being granted grace upon grace. In the coming weeks when you hear these stories, take note and take courage. Take them as bread for the journey we're on, which is to reshape our lives and reorient our church so we are truly following the will of God in the footsteps of our savior.

For this week I wonder... how can we make this place a place of the covenant? What could it look like if we took seriously the reality that all creatures on this earth contain the same breath of God that we do?