

Covenants and Creation, by Doug Pritchard

TUMC, Feb. 22, 2015

Ps 25, Gn 9:8-17, Mk 1:9-15

1. Intro

The Genesis passage just read for us is the Old Testament lectionary reading for today, the first Sunday in Lent. The passage speaks about the covenant God made with Noah's family after the destruction of much of Creation. So today I would like to focus on covenants and our role in caring for creation as part of our covenant with the Creator.

2. Covenants

In Biblical parlance a covenant is an agreement between parties who thereby enter into a relationship with each other. Sometimes it is an agreement between equals, as in the treaty between the Israelites and the Phoenicians (1 Ki. 5). Sometimes it is between a stronger earthly power and a weaker one, such as between the Israelites and the Gibeonites who asked to be Israel's slaves (Jos. 9-10). But the most significant ones are between God and God's chosen people. In these godly covenants, God takes the initiative as an act of grace and favour. God makes promises and the people respond with obedience. A covenant is often sealed by a sacrifice and often has a reminder sign.

The first time explicit covenant language is used in the Bible is here, in this passage from Genesis chapter 9. In this covenant, God promises to save Noah's family (6:18), and to never again destroy the earth with a flood (9:11). Noah's family responds with obedience in building the ark, gathering in the animals, and all else that God commanded (6:22). The covenant is sealed with a sacrifice (8:20), and God sets a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant (9:13).

This covenant is set against the backdrop of what had happened before, since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, and could no longer gather their food there. Their son Cain, the first farmer, killed his brother Abel, the first herdsman, in the first cultivated fields (Gn. 4:1-8). Then Cain built the first city and named it after his son Enoch which means "re-creation" (4:17). Vengeance grew as Enoch's great-great-grandson Lamech killed a man for merely wounding him and boasted, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold (4:24)." Lamech's son Jubal was the ancestor of all who play musical instruments (4:21). Another son Tubal was the first to make bronze and iron tools (4:22). But weapons soon followed, and humans made heroes of the warrior race of Nephilim (6:4). We moderns might like to see all this as Progress and evidence of increasing civilization. But God saw that the earth was soon filled with violence (6:11) and was grieved to his heart and sorry that he had made humankind (6:6). Despite this, God took the initiative to reboot, to re-create, and to try again through saving Noah's family and making this covenant promise to not send such a flood again.

And what happened next? The birth of Empire. Humankind multiplied and then gathered on the Mesopotamian plain to build the city of Babel and a great tower (Gn. 10-11). A tower reaching up to the sky, up to God's own abode. As in the Garden of Eden, we still wanted to "be like God" (3:5).

Yet God does not give up on us. In the wake of scattering the people from Babel, God began again in calling out Abram and Sarai and made a covenant with them (Gn. 12). In this covenant God promised

land and descendants, even when both seemed impossible. Abram and Sarai initially responded with obedience and left their home in Haran for the unknown Promised Land. But their faith in God wavered and Sarai gave her enslaved girl Hagar to Abram to speed up the getting of descendants. Their grandchildren then sold one of their own, Joseph, into slavery in Egypt. Despite Joseph's rescue by God, eventually the whole Hebrew nation became enslaved by Egypt.

Five hundred years after the covenant with Abram and Sarai, God led the Hebrew people to freedom again through the Red Sea and renewed the covenant at Mt. Sinai with the giving of the Law. Despite the people's immediate resort to a golden calf, God was faithful and reiterated this covenant, promising protection and prosperity if the people loved and obeyed God alone. They didn't. Warfare, idolatry, and exile to Babylon followed. During this time of turmoil, God's prophets foretold the coming of a new covenant, when God's law would be written on our very hearts.

This prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 9:15). He offered one perfect sacrifice, himself (Heb. 10), and this covenant was sealed with the sign of his resurrection. And in the first words of his public ministry recorded by Mark, which we heard earlier today, he called us to respond with repentance and belief in the gospel, the good news, the good news of God's saving grace.

3. Creation

As I reflected on all these covenants, and on Jesus' call to repent and believe, I was drawn back to the setting of the first covenant with Noah's family. In the beginning, what God had created was very good. We humans were planted in that good creation to till it and keep it. But that wasn't enough. We humans wanted more. We wanted to be like God. So we took of the forbidden fruit and ate. As a consequence we were expelled from the garden. Thereafter, bringing forth the fruit of the ground, and the fruit of the womb, became painful. Our relations with each other deteriorated into domination, murder, and mass warfare. God's good creation became so degraded that God resolved to bring a flood and start again. But in restoring creation, and in the covenant with all creation marked by the rainbow, God promised to love and care for us, and all creation, forever. In return for our obedience. That same love and care, and that same call to obedience, is repeated in each of the subsequent covenants – with Abram and Sarai, with the Hebrews at Mt Sinai, right up to Jesus' fulfilment of the promise.

Yet I am still troubled by our degrading of God's first, good creation, and the consequent flood. After the flood, God promised not to destroy the earth again in this way, but might we do so instead? As I read more about the stresses we are putting on the planet, I worry. Last year was the hottest year on record for the earth, despite the cool weather we have in our little corner of it. The seas are rising and becoming more acidic; ice sheets are shrinking; rain storms are more intense. Jane and I saw it clearly on our bike trip this summer with the hottest weather ever recorded in central BC, and torrential rains causing a \$3 billion flood in the Assinboine River valley, and in Sudbury and again in Nova Scotia we got a month's rainfall in one night. It happened again last weekend as the Maritimes got hit with their biggest snow fall ever. We are sending huge quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere in an instant, geologically speaking. Most climate scientists say that this is very dangerous, maybe even catastrophic if it continues.

Human civilizations have disappeared before. Jared Diamond's book "Collapse" documents some of those disappearances – the Easter Islanders, the Anasazi natives in the southwest USA, the Vikings in

Greenland, and on a much larger scale the Mayans of southern Mexico. They all faced environmental limitations, but their increasingly destructive practices ignored those limits and doomed their societies. Could they not see it? Could they not change and avoid a collapse? As the Easter Islanders climbed further and further up the mountain slope to chop trees to transport yet another huge stone head from the quarry, could they not see that they were running out of trees? As the Vikings destroyed the small woodlands of Greenland and their livestock trampled the fragile grasslands, could they not see that this was unsustainable? As the Mayans built more and taller pyramids and degraded their valley soils could they not see that they were exceeding the carrying capacity of their fragile environment? The Mayans were perhaps the most advanced civilization in North America and yet they disappeared within just a few years around 900AD. Some of you may have seen the ruins of that Mayan culture. Coming upon one of their abandoned cities in 1839, the American traveller John Stephens wrote, “[300 word quote from p. 158].”

Could this be our destiny? Some environmentalists think so. One of my own sons thinks so.

4. Our future

But... other environmentalists, and another of my sons, thinks not.

You too may be despairing, or hoping, or both.

Returning to the Biblical covenants: God promised to love and care for us and the rest of creation. And we humans promised to obey. We promised to till and to keep the garden. But we failed, again and again. Finally, because God so loved the world, that is the whole cosmos, God sent his son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. That Son Jesus, who is God, and who is co-Creator with God of the whole cosmos, came down to earth as a human. He walked the dry hills of Palestine as a human. He was baptized in the Jordan River to affirm John the Baptizer’s call for repentance. He was tempted in the desert as a human by Satan himself. Then he opened his earthly ministry with the call to repent, to turn from our former ways, and to believe in the gospel, the good news that God in Christ has fulfilled the promises of the old covenants.

Repenting involves more than just remorse for our past sinful ways. It requires a complete change in our thoughts, and a complete change in our conduct as proof that we have in fact rejected our former sinful ways and committed ourselves to live and act in more godly ways. Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt. 7:21). In addressing today’s climate crisis, we need to dramatically reduce our carbon emissions and to embrace the already available low-carbon energy technologies. We can do much in our own individual lives and homes to reduce our carbon footprints. Jane and I over the years have reduced our use of electricity and gasoline and natural gas by 50%. It was easy and not very expensive. Theologian Ched Myers calls out in our rootless culture for us to also get to know and love our particular home place in creation, our own life-giving watersheds and all that nourishes and sustains them. Pastor Marilyn has felt a call to use her upcoming sabbatical to deepen her understanding of a faith-based approach to Creation Care, and so we will likely be hearing more from her too on this theme.

Despite the reductions Jane and I have made in our carbon emissions, there is not much more we can do in a 93yo house. So we also need to act together to make bigger changes in address this growing

environmental crisis. It is too much for any one of us to solve alone. Diamond in his book “Collapse” also looks at societies that pulled themselves back from the brink of destruction. These include 19th century Japan, and the Vikings in Iceland, and the Incas of Peru, who all chose to stop their deforestation and other destructive practices before it was too late. These examples give Diamond hope that we too can solve our current environmental problems. To do so we need to carefully consider the information that is increasingly available in our interconnected world; we need to think long-term; and we need to consider which of our values and traditions and economic systems are sustainable. As Naomi Klein says repeatedly in her recent book, which Otto Tiessen frequently commends to us, “This changes everything.” This crisis changes everything.

So it is encouraging that the Ontario government has just committed itself to putting some sort of a price on carbon emissions, in order to level the playing field with other energy sources, and to make the polluter, which is all of us, pay. They have invited our comments about how that might be done best. I urge you to download their discussion paper and respond to it. This is one of the privileges we have in a democracy and it is a privilege that needs exercising. We also need leadership at the federal level in order to avoid a patch-work of expensive, uncoordinated carbon policies. As a nation we are nowhere near meeting the minimalist carbon emissions target that our government set when they pulled us out of the Kyoto protocol. And it is disingenuous to insist that China has to reduce its carbon emissions first. Now that we have outsourced much of our own manufacturing to China, their emissions are now, in large part, really our emissions too.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, everything that God created was good, was indeed very good. God made us humans in the image of God, and breathed the very breath of God into us. God placed us in the garden to tend it and keep it. What would God say about our tending and keeping thus far? We are accountable for it. God covenanted with us time and again, promising to love and care for us forever and set a bow in the sky as a sign of that enduring promise. We in turn promised to obey God’s commands, including the command to care for creation. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said last year, “To serve as custodians of creation is not an empty title; it requires that we act, and with all the urgency this dire situation demands.”

The final proof of God’s love and care is the coming of Jesus on earth for our salvation. The co-Creator of the whole cosmos came to dwell among us as a human, to show us God’s ways, and to take upon himself the sins of the whole world. As he hung on the cross, the whole of creation groaned. The sky turned black. The earth shook. All but his mother and a few disciples mocked him and then fled. But death could not hold him. As he rose again and burst from the tomb on that Easter morning, he fulfilled the covenant promises and accomplished our salvation.

Remember his opening words in Mark: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Thanx be to God, our Creator and our redeemer. Amen.