

THE ENTANGLEMENTS OF UNRESTRICTIVE COVENANT

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Text: Genesis 9:8–17

Biblical scholars maintain that the story of Noah and the ark originated with the Jewish priests, offered during Israel's exile to assure the people of God who had witnessed what looked like the unraveling of creation that God had not forgotten them. But it also was an assertion that, notwithstanding their present situation, God did not view them as an enemy to be violently vanquished. Given the unraveling of their entire world through exile, the people of Israel must have wondered if God had given up on God's commitment to what God created. So this story about the unraveling of all creation in a destructive flood, while sparing Noah, his family, and animals he sheltered with him in the ark, culminates with God laying bare divine regret, intention, and commitments. God's radical, affirmative response comes in the form of the first covenant in the biblical witness that God makes with humanity.

In simple words attributed to God, God declares that God is establishing a covenant with all of creation, symbolized with the sign of a bow, which will prompt God to remember that covenant. Oh, just in case the import of what God is doing is not missed, God declares that the covenant is everlasting. God does not ask for anything from Noah and his family or every living creature: just an unrestricted binding and obligation of God in relationship with humanity, with all of the animals, and with the entire created order. Creation remains willful and imperfect, evil has not been overcome or transformed, and the sin of the world will likely grieve God mightily, and yet, after having struck out in anger against the creation before, this time God repents. God changes God's mind. God returns to God's truest and original intent... a creation that God loved and declared good. And just so God will never again be tempted to strike out in anger, God erects an undrawn bow as a sign to help God remember. God disarms. God gives up power. God gives up the right to act. God places a limit on God's freedom to act in God's own interest for the sake of creation's survival. God's covenant changes the meaning of a symbol, the weapon of a bow, from one of retribution to one of peace, from one of death to one of life.

I hope we see how utterly gracious and determined God is to be in relationship. I suspect that if God sought our counsel on this matter of covenant, many of us would advise God not to do it because they don't deserve it. No matter how flawed the creation may be, no matter how willful and disobedient humanity may be, no matter how diabolical and idolatrous we will become, God promises to never act again to unravel the creation. God eternally entangles God's self with creation. At a time when the language of covenant feels stilted and when the purpose of Lent feels increasingly unfamiliar, God models intentionality, commitment, and accountability to keep our hope alive. This is the essence of covenant. This is the essence of Lent. This is about making an intentional effort at being in relationship and then deciding to be obligated and accountable, to give up on being untethered, unmoved, and unconcerned about the fate of the other. God makes a promise not to be provoked or goaded into giving up on creation or striking out in anger and retribution. God relinquishes the divine prerogative to storm off and break

faith and relationship in righteous indignation with a sinful and idolatrous creation. It is a promise to stay—to stay present, to stay engaged, to stay entangled, to stay in relationship.

Some will rightly argue that, given what we have seen in this world, God has a mixed record on staying the hand of destruction against the creation. Evil holds sway all over the creation. Death and destruction from floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, war, and genocide have destroyed God's good creation. One can argue that our exploitation of the earth is unraveling God's good creation. But if we take seriously God's promise of an unrestrictive covenant with all generations, all living creatures, and all the earth, then we need not fear that these floods are God's doing. We need not fear that God is drawing the divine bow against us as God's enemies. On the contrary, we, too, should be reminded that God's intentionality, commitment, and accountability in covenant with us means we get to start again. Because of God's graciousness, we start afresh.

The word "covenant" is anachronistic to our modern ears, an ancient language that does not reflect our technical understandings of contracts or our cultural conceptions of relationship. I wonder if the idea of obligation or accountability to another assaults our sense of individualism. We've also been conditioned by religion, politics, and capitalism to move through the world focused on our self-interest, untethered, unmoved, and unconcerned about those who are of our tribe. Perhaps, committing ourselves to relationship with willful and imperfect people is too hard and potentially limits our right to judge and separate. I do know that we are easily goaded into believing that God and humanity are enemies, and, in our fear, we have to find the other who are less than we are, more sinful than we are, more deserving of judgment than we are, and less deserving of a break than we are. But in the person of Jesus, we see just how unrestrictive and everlasting God's covenant is . . . Jesus expands the promise of life to a new generation, entangling God deeper with God's good creation.

Right now, it looks as if the creation is unraveling: A global pandemic is causing millions of deaths all over the world. Unstable climate patterns are creating unimaginable weather in unexpected regions of our nation and world. Our electorate is so polarized that voting and elections are less preferred by some citizens than insurrection and lifetime rule by autocrats. Disinformation and conspiracy theories are so embedded in our information platforms that communication is nearly impossible across differences. Racial hatred and white supremacy are seemingly so intractable that simply declaring "Black lives matter" remains a debatable fact.

But we need not fear God. God's covenant is everlasting. What the world has become does not appear to be an attempt by God to unravel the creation. If we are honest, and this is the season that calls for honesty and truth-telling, we are the ones we should be afraid of. It is the human being that is waging war on each other, on living creatures, on the earth. It is the human being who has forgotten what it means to commit and obligate oneself to God, neighbor, or creation with newness and graciousness. It is the human being who is oppressing, dominating, and exploiting the most vulnerable among us. The governments and communities tasked with the welfare of their people have broken covenant with their Black, poor, and Indigenous inhabitants. We see it clearly. Our government will not share power or resources with them; will not intentionally obligate itself to make vulnerable people whole and then accuses them of failing in their obligations to contribute; over-polices them and incarcerates them en masse for the slightest infraction; withholds from them living wages, affordable housing and health care, and good education, and turns around and blames them for not holding up their end of the bargain of citizenship. We need not fear God; God's covenant is everlasting.

As part of the call to reconsider the language and practice of covenant-making, one scholar said simply, "Human beings should follow the divine lead."¹ What would it mean to obligate ourselves to the most

¹Terence Fretheim, "Genesis," *New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 401.

vulnerable in covenant? How do we covenant with each other such that our community becomes a refuge of safety, wholeness, and restoration? How do we act with intentionality, commitment, and accountability so that we become a guarantee of survival for those whose world is unraveling? The peace, justice, and beloved community we hope for begins with being intentionally committed to and never forgetting our neighbor. It is a call for entangling ourselves in relationship with others like God obligates God's self to us. It is precisely God's nature and intention in obligating God's self to creation in so unrestricted a way that should impress upon us just how radical it is to be renewed, rescued, and returned to a God determined to be gracious no matter what. So, during this season of Lent, how will we reclaim covenant? What will be the sign we give ourselves to remember the promise of covenant?