

Signs of the Covenant

Signs are a common part of our everyday lives [Image #01, FMC]. They give us direction, tell us where to go [#02, arrows], guide us safely to whatever destination we are trying to reach, when to turn [#04, left turn Hillsboro], when to slow down [#05, yellow light], (or speed up, however you interpret a yellow light), when to stop [#06, stop], when to go [#07, green light]. They identify the destination, so we know when we've arrived [#08, Welcome to Hillsboro]. They tell us who's in charge [#09, Greg Zielke], or who we might expect to find at any given destination [#10, Aleen]. Signs sometimes feel like a promise of good news [#11, Wendy's]. And sometimes they remind us of something important, something we need to know. [#12, Covid Testing]

The word "covenant" is probably not part of our daily vocabulary. But what it represents is. In its simplest sense, a covenant is an agreement between two or more parties [#13, God/Adam]. And behind that agreement, or maybe beneath it, like a foundation, there lies a relationship [#14, Larry/Angie]. A very important relationship. A relationship meant to last, to endure a long, long time. If not forever.

Covenants almost always require commitment, dedication, determination. They come with pledges made and promises kept [#15, mother/baby]. Sometimes that promise flows just in one direction, for example from a stronger party to a weaker one, as in this picture, or this one [#16 (13), God/Adam]. (We could call that a "unilateral" commitment, or covenant.) And some promises flow in both directions, requiring something from both sides or parties. Such covenants could be called "bi-lateral." It takes two to make them work [#17/14, Angie and Larry].

The Bible contains at least four important covenants between God, and one or more of God's people. There is God's covenant with Noah, which we will come back to [#18, heading]. There is God's covenant with Abraham [#19, heading]. There is, of course, God's famous covenant with Moses and the people of Israel [#20, heading]. And there is God's covenant with King David [#21, heading].

Today we're going to talk about just one covenant, just one relationship, namely the ongoing covenant between God and God's people [#21.5, "Signs of the Covenant"]. Including us. But I'm going to point out three separate signs of that covenant.

The first sign is the rainbow, which we find in today's story from Genesis. This covenant starts out as a unilateral promise between God (on the giving side), and Noah and his sons (on the receiving side). But it very quickly expands to include all of Noah's "descendants" [#22, text], (which technically includes all of us, since ostensibly Noah and his sons were the only surviving progenitors). Then it expands again to include "all future generations [#23, text]." And one more time to include "every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth [#24, text]." In other words, all of creation. Everything which God has created (the story of which is told just a few chapters earlier in Genesis 1).

Today's story begins with God saying "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you [#25, text]." "As for me." It's a unilateral covenant. It's entirely on God's initiative. And it's a promise, from God, that flows only in one direction: God's promise to never again send a flood to destroy the world. From that moment on, forever after, the world is declared to be a safe

place. At least as far as God is concerned. What we humans choose to do—to the world, to one another—is of course another matter entirely.

As a sign of that covenant, God puts his bow in the sky [#26/00, rainbow]. We assume, or course, that he's talking about a rainbow. But many scholars believe that what it represents is God's bow... (as in, "bow and arrows"). God's weapon of war. God's means of hunting and killing what he has created. God has forever set that aside, never to be used again.

Interestingly, God places that bow in the sky as a reminder specifically for himself. So that God will never forget his promise. Further insuring us that we need never fear that God will ever again destroy the world. A reminder therefore also to us: that we are eternally safe. At least as far as God is concerned. What humans choose to do is another matter entirely.

What do you think of when you see a rainbow [#26/00, rainbow]? I think, first of all, of what a beautiful place the world God created is. Stunningly beautiful. I am moved to awe. Which is another way of saying, moved to worship.

But do you also feel safe, whenever you see a rainbow? You should. At least as far as God is concerned. You, we, all of creation is forever after and eternally in God's loving hand [#27/13, God/Adam]. Doubly so, in this case! ☺

The second sign of God's covenant that he has given us that I wanted to talk about today is Scripture. Otherwise known as the Bible [hold up a Bible] (I have one here). In today's story, in Genesis 9:8, we read, "Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him" [#28, text]. How matter-of-fact those words sound. As if God was always talking to his people. As if that was the most natural thing in the world.

Don't you wish God would just speak to us, like he did to Noah, and to so many others in so many Old Testament stories? God does speak to us. Our relationship with God is a covenant in which God promises to keep speaking us [#28.5, Still Speaking]. To always speak to us. To never stop speaking to us

Scripture, the Bible, is God's word (small w), inspired or literally breathed into God's human creation. As if God was saying, "Tell you what. I'll breathe it in. You write it down." And so they started doing that very thing. Stories (like the one we heard this morning). Poems. Wisdom literature. Law codes. Songs. Some words of which, at least, they actually used as they worshipped. As they honored and celebrated their covenant relationship with God.

Think of how old these words are. Think of how they have been passed down from generation to generation to generation. Think of how they have survived. Think of how they have thrived! Think of how they continue to expand and grow and spread, to be translated into ever new languages.

What do you think of when you pick up a Bible [hold up]? Do you think of how ancient our world is? And we have no idea. Millions, billions of years old, scientists say. And it continues to survive and mostly thrive today.

Do you think of how our covenant relationship with God eventually became, already in ancient time, a bi-lateral covenant? That it requires something of us as well? First of all, that we listen whenever God speaks (just like Noah and his sons listened so long ago) [#28,5, Still Speaking]. But moreover, that we actually do what God's word is asking of us. That we obey God's law. Live the way God wants us to live. Love the way God wants us to love. Scripture—our Bible [hold up Bible]—is a sign, pointing us to or guiding us to God's will [#28.55, arrow to Hillsboro]. Bringing us to our final destination, God's heavenly kingdom.

A third and final sign of God's covenant that he has given to us is Jesus Christ [#28.6, Jesus]. Who represents God's willingness to come to the world—to come to us—as one of us. The Bible of course tells that story [#29, John 1:1-5 text]. But its truth, its reality, continues. Even when and where a Bible itself is not at hand.

God's coming to us was and continues to be in so many different ways a sacrifice. God sacrificing his divine, transcendent glory to become a mortal human, with two legs, and two arms, a mouth and ears and eyes. God sacrificing his human self on the cross, like the greatest and most powerful gift on an altar ever. So that there would never again be any doubt of God's tender love for us, and moreover that we are worthy of God's love. Forgiven and restored.

Jesus the Christ. What a gift! A gift we can never repay. Like the rainbow, like the Bible, it was entirely on God's initiative. And yet, like the Bible, it is bilateral in at least one sense: it does ask something of us in return. Let me make that more direct and personal and relational. Jesus asks something of us in return. It's really very simple. He asks that we follow him. That we learn from him. That we live like him.

What do you think of when you see an image of Jesus [#30, icon]? Do you remember how much God loves us? Do you remember at least some of what Jesus taught during the short time he was on earth? That living according to God's will for the world, obeying God's "sweet as honey" Torah, comes down to two basic principles or commandments: loving God, and loving our neighbor in the way we love ourselves.

What kind of "sign of the covenant" is Jesus? Is he like this [#31/02, arrows]? How about this? [#32/08, Welcome]. Or this? [#33/11, Wendy's]

Jesus. [#34/00, rainbow]. So beautiful. Stunningly so. I don't know about you, but I'm out of words! And so I will simply say "Amen."