

## **Chosen**

Genesis 9:8-17  
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*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. NRSV)*

When it comes to our pets,  
let's be honest:

we chose them -- they didn't choose us.

No, we chose them, and when we did so,

we didn't know whether they'd be affectionate or hostile,  
loyal or rebellious, intelligent or . . . thick-headed.

We didn't know whether they'd respect our property  
or be a malevolent force of utter destruction.

We didn't know what they'd be like as they grew older,  
how they'd react to a move,  
whether they'd accept new family members.

We didn't know if they'd get sick or how long they'd live..

We didn't know any of these things -- not completely at least --  
but we chose them.

And when we did so, we committed ourselves

to protect them, to provide for them,

to care for them, to love them --

even though they can be so irritating and so ungrateful,

even though they demand attention in the middle of the night,

though they cry out in fear at their own reflection,

though they beg for more food -- *your* food -- after they've just eaten,

even though they tear out of the house and down the road in a driving rainstorm

and you have to go searching for them, calling for them, freezing for them,

and you have to explain to the new neighbor why you're walking through their yard

and looking underneath their cars

and then you finally see him,

and Lloyd pauses, looks you right in the eye, and keeps running.

(Sorry, give me a minute, that one was personal.)

But, still, even after all of these things,  
we protect them, provide for them, care for them, and love them.  
Why? Well, even though we may ask ourselves that question from time to time,  
the answer is simply, ultimately . . . because we chose them.  
We've claimed them as our own before they claimed us as their own,  
and we take delight – utter delight -- when they return our love  
(or at very least, when they seem to tolerate our presence).

Chosen.

The theme for our Lent worship series in “Deep calls to deep.”

When the worship planning team met together,  
we sensed that God was inviting us, inviting Berkeley, to a deeper sense of intimacy,  
an intimacy with God and with each other.

It's been almost a year since we were all together in one place.

And it's been a tiring year.

This is an invitation to pause, to take some deep breaths,  
and to ask and reflect on some fundamental questions of faith:

What is essential?

What really matters?

Who are we, at our core?

What does God ask of us?

This is an invitation to the heart of your God.

Genesis tells us that before the Flood, before the devastation and destruction,  
God saw how great people's wickedness had become,  
how every inclination of their inner thoughts was bent on evil,  
and how, because of them, the earth was filled with violence.

Genesis chapter 6, verse 6, is one of the saddest verses in the entire Bible:

“God was sorry that he had made human beings,  
and it grieved him to his heart.

Another translation says that God's heart was filled with pain.

Think about that.

Before the Flood, there is no anger here. There is no wrath.

There is pain. There is sorrow. There is grief.

Grief before the Flood.

Genesis, chapter 8 says that after Noah and his family  
and all the creatures got off the ark,  
Noah built an altar, and offered a sacrifice to God.

God smelled the pleasing aroma and said,  
“Never again. Never again will I curse the ground because of people.  
Never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.  
Even though the human heart  
is inclined toward evil, never again.”

And God went on to bless Noah and his family,  
saying those words we've already heard.

“I now establish my covenant with you  
and with your descendants after you

and with every living creature that was with you  
—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals,  
all those that came out of the ark with you  
—every living creature on earth.

I establish my covenant with you:

Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood;  
never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

And God repeats over and over and over and over and over --  
five times in nine verses --  
that this covenant includes human beings and all of creation --  
all y'all.

That repetition is one of the things  
that was noticed right away by those of us who participated  
in the first installment of Casually Deep Conversations.

But here's another things we noticed this past Wednesday:  
God made the promises in this covenant, this first covenant,  
even though people's thoughts and actions  
continued to be bent toward evil,  
even though the earth would continue to be full of violence.

I mean, as Rick Hostetter noted,  
immediately after the verses before us this morning,  
Noah gets drunk and naked.

When you compare before the Flood and after the Flood in this story,  
the only thing that seems to have changed . . . is God.  
More specifically, God limits God's own options  
to respond to human sin.

“I am setting my bow in the clouds,” 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 generations.”

“Do not be afraid of the waters,  
for never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.  
When my bow appears in the clouds,  
I will see it and remember my covenant with you.”

We call it a rainbow,  
but the Hebrew word refers to the kind of bow that shoots arrows.

In the ancient world, a warrior put down his bow  
as a sign that he was done,  
that the fight had ended,  
that the battle was over.

Here, after the Flood had blotted out a fallen creation,  
it's as if God is so sick of wickedness and violence  
that God becomes the first to lay down the bow.

Even though people's thoughts and actions  
continued to be bent toward evil,

even though people would continue to do battle with God and each other,  
even though we see the consequences of vicious acts of violence every week,  
God will not respond to human sin by sending waters to destroy.

It's as if destroying everything, causing another Flood,  
would be too much for God to bear. Too awful.  
So God chooses another way,  
a way that freely limited God's own freedom,  
a way that powerfully restrained God's own power.  
God chooses the path of vulnerability because God chooses . . .  
me and you and all the creatures too.

The ends of the rainbow stretch as far as the eyes can see,  
With this ring, I thee wed.

And doesn't that give us a glimpse of the God we know in Jesus?  
Jesus, God incarnate, freely limiting his freedom,  
powerfully restraining his power,  
and loving even when people betrayed him,  
arrested him, flogged him and crucified him.  
Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God  
something to be grasped, but instead, he made himself nothing,  
and ultimately humbling himself even to death on a cross.  
Jesus is the God who first laid down his arms.

This past Wednesday,  
one of the other things that we talked about was our deep, intimate, relationships  
and how they developed to become so meaningful.  
The common thread throughout all of these stories was a shared vulnerability.  
The relationships that mean so much to us became deeper and deeper in intimacy  
through shared experiences of deep pain, crisis, and grief.

All of us – every single one of us, whether we are aware of it or not –  
are on a continual search for safety and security in our relationships.  
We have this need both to choose others as our own,  
and to be chosen by others as a part of their own.  
To include and to be included,  
To know, and to be known.  
To desire, and to be desired,  
to love, and to be loved.

Forming these bonds, these attachments,  
is essential to our well-being.  
And so if one of these attachments is breached or ending  
– people feel insecure, unsafe, fearful.  
And when that happens, it's hard to be vulnerable enough to risk that that sort of pain again.  
And it's so sad, because it's that vulnerability that leads to those intimate relationships  
that we all so desperately need.  
Isn't it a paradox? A sign of healing is a willingness  
to be vulnerable enough to be hurt again?  
It can be a long process to get back to that point.

Just in the past few weeks,  
there's been another story of another well-known pastor  
who was harassing, exploiting, and abusing the bodies of women  
as he proclaimed the good news of Jesus with his lips.  
I grieve for the women who have been left in his wake,  
and I know know that we, in the Mennonite Church, have stories like these.

You know, one of the scriptures that we Mennonites like to quote again and again,  
is Matthew 16:14:  
Jesus said to his disciples:  
"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.  
For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,  
but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

Pick up your cross and follow me.  
I'd always heard those words almost exclusively as an instruction about Christian ethics --  
how followers of Jesus are to behave in this world --  
being willing to suffer on behalf of others rather than taking up arms against them.  
The test was our willingness, our behavior.  
And it is that, but it's deeper than that, too.  
Because it represents God's behavior, God's willingness.  
the ultimate end of it is not suffering, it's intimacy,  
a shared intimacy with God,  
the One who lays down the bow,  
a shared intimacy with others  
as we do the same.

Those who abuse their power over others do not represent Jesus  
who freely limited his own freedom,  
who powerfully restrained his own power.  
They do not carry that cross.

In Mark's gospel, when Jesus enters the water to be baptized by John,  
the heavens tear open, but it was not to release the flood waters of destruction.  
This time, it was to release the Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus like a dove.

And just as Noah and his family were in the Ark with the wild beasts for forty days,  
Jesus, was led by the Spirit to the wilderness with the wild animals for forty days,  
emerging to proclaim,  
"The time has come.  
The kingdom of God is near.  
Repent and believe the good news."

Fulfilling God's covenant with Noah  
and with all the people and creatures after him,  
Jesus vulnerably gives human beings the capacity to begin again,  
to live in right relationships with God, with each other, and with all creation.

And it's water that that cleanses us from sin --  
the waters not of destruction, the waters of redemption,  
the waters of baptism that Jesus entered before us.

In other words, "I chose you before you chose me.

I will protect you, provide for you, care for you, and love you  
even though I don't truly know whether you'll be affectionate or hostile,  
loyal or rebellious, intelligent or thick-headed,

Even though I don't know whether you'll respect my Creation  
or be a malevolent force of utter destruction.

Even though I don't know what you'll be like when you grow older,  
when you've gone through some hard experiences that will shape you,

Even though I don't know whether you'll accept other members of my family.

I choose you, God seems to be saying,  
even when you are so irritating and so ungrateful,  
even when you demand attention in the middle of the night,  
even when you cry out in fear at your own reflection,  
even when you beg for more, more, more, after you already have more than enough,  
even when you flee from my shelter  
and, when I go out searching for you, calling for you, suffering for you, and then see you,  
you pause, look at me, and keep running.

Why do I do this?

Well, the answer is simply, ultimately . . . because I chose you.

I claimed you as my own before you claimed me as you own.

You are mine.

And I take delight – utter delight --

when you return my love and live together in peace.