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February 18, 2024

Genesis 9:8-17

Covenants Written in Water

Prayer: O God, sculptor of our souls and Author of life, you bring new life, provide signs of hope, even as we walk near the valley of the shadow of death. As your presence in days of old guided Noah and his loved ones to a new creation, so guide our hearts with your presence that we may be called forth into the new life you offer each one of us...

Covenants come in many varieties. We have covenants with one another, and God also holds covenants with people in history e.g., Noah, Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and us. The people of the covenant are the children of Israel, and the new covenant is Jesus' invitation opening that covenant to non-Jews. The reminders of God's covenants with us are hidden in plain sight: water, light, air, land, bread, the cross, and of course, the soul. We will be exploring these in worship throughout the season of Lent this year.

The Niantic Community Church is in Covenant with our two member denominations: The United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ. And if you are a member here, you are also in covenant with this congregation. Staff have our own covenants, which have to do with expectations, responsibilities, and partnerships in our work. We all live with explicit and implicit covenants in our lives – everything from the unions of our parents and grandparents, responsibilities in raising children, to the working hours of our favorite businesses.

Genesis 9 contains some of the oldest writing we have in the Bible; scholars call it the "primeval Yahwistic history." The oldest stories we have all describe catastrophes: The destruction of the flood, the destruction of the *Tower of Babel*, and the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Each describes the erasures of communities and go on to fill in details about people as

they make new beginnings. It makes sense that these stories would be the ones that get passed down. It describes the beginning of a new era. The era we live in.

Robert Ballard, who discovered the wreckage of the Titanic, has a theory that there was a worldwide flood. 12000 years ago, he says, much of the world was covered in ice, from here to the North Pole there was about 15 million kilometers of ice -- over a mile high. But then it started to melt, and it would have been in his words "the mother of all floods." He suggests that catastrophic flooding, particularly in the region of the Black Sea would have happened around the year 5000 BCE¹. Which coincides with what scholarship tells us about the age of the story of Noah. Other civilizations in the Mediterranean basin also have flood stories from this era. It appears to mark a new beginning for the entire region.

While we hear the story of terrible destruction, we also hear it from the point of view of those who survived. It is our heritage too.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56487>



Noah's ark icon, 20th century, Natalia Ermakova, St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Amsterdam

This image is an Icon which is in the St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church in Amsterdam. It was created by a living artist, Natalia Ermakova. The way icon worship works in eastern rite churches is that the icon is used to hold your gaze, like a focus point in meditation. You pay attention to where your focus is drawn. The gold paint which is the air, the rainbow, and the way the waves glisten all reflects light. Light is important in iconography.

Time has collapsed in this image in that Noah is releasing the dove while she returns with an olive branch. The rainbow is out while it is flooding. In the foreground you see the raven has something to eat which looks like maybe a squirrel(?); I am wondering if that is an olive tree peeking through the waves a symbol of peace and prosperity. And the air and sky are continued underneath the water, giving the sense that the whole cosmos has been flooded and held together. In conveys safety, not the story of catastrophic destruction.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58490>

¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/evidence-suggests-biblical-great-flood-noahs-time-happened/story?id=17884533>



Peter Koenig, *The Ship of the Church* 20th century

I could not, not show you this, it has so much going on in it! This image depicts a theological reading of the Noah's ark story which is that the ark carried the faithful to safety. That it conveyed the church...even though Jesus had not lived yet. You see the crosses on the top, the animals poking out the windows, two people, what appears to be a white man and a woman of color are simultaneously releasing the dove and receiving her back. There is a trumpeter in a far tower, heralding their triumph. A crazy looking running man is the figurehead on the bow, trumpeting, running, and with wings.

I mentioned previously that at another church when we were beginning the confirmation class and asking the kids about what questions they have one of the kids ask me to explain how it all began... and I started thinking about what a particularly good question that is. The Bible is full of beginning points, entry points in the narrative. The story of Noah is the oldest beginning we have, although it is not *at* the beginning, Adam and Eve *are* at the beginning of Genesis, which means beginning -- literally. The destruction of the tower of Babel is another beginning. Languages and different cultural identities develop. The people have a new beginning when they leave Egypt, cross the red sea, Pharaoh and his army drown, and they begin a search for the promised land which will take them 40 years. They begin again when they enter it. The Gospel of John begins "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God..." I could go on... So many beginnings. People's lives begin again when they are healed of their diseases. When Jesus says those who are about to stone a woman, you who are without sin cast the first stone, it is a new beginning for all of them. Those holding stones reminded of their sin, she who was about to be stoned – forgiven and freed.

Baptism is an important beginning for Christians.

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Lateran Baptistery, Rome year 460

This ceiling is painted over an octagonal baptistery dating from the year 460. It is called the Lateran Baptistery. The ceiling is slightly newer than the baptistery, but you see that it is painted to remind us of the stories of faith, and at the very center is a dove. Like the one that rested on Jesus after he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. And Noah's dove. For many generations this was the only baptistery in Rome. It is called "the fountain of life." Today the church "basilica" around it is also octagonal.

The octagonal shape has been so influential that to this very day, many baptistries are also created in this shape. The water is a symbol of the covenant between God and God's people. An element so fundamental to life that no one can take it from you.

During our final hymn, you will be invited to come forward to renew your baptism – a covenant made in water – either for you by people who made promises on your behalf, or if you were older when you were baptized, a covenant you chose to enter as an act of faith. You may come forward to touch the water as a reminder of that covenant. And the covenant that God continues to honor.

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