

Last week, we explored God's covenant with Noah (and you and me as well!) to never again destroy the Earth by flood. You may remember that I encouraged you to pay less attention to the flood insurance policy, and instead encouraged you to focus on three essential truths revealed in the rendering of the Noahic Covenant:

- 1) God, our Creator, is vested in everybody.
- 2) God, our Creator, is vested in everything (in creation).
- 3) God, our Creator, is vested in every time.

This morning's text recounts a second covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, one written a few generations later, but one that I believe should offer us an identical takeaway: Everybody. Everything. Every time.

And just like last week's lection, this morning's text requires a quick disclaimer. Our highlighted verses are conveniently sandwiched around two problematic components: 1) the promise of an occupied land in perpetuity and 2) the stipulation of circumcision to remain in covenantal compliance.

Let me say that I do not personally believe my affirmation from God is evidenced by ownership of land, nor do I believe that God's love and care for me entitles me to claim lands at the expense of my neighbors. Let me also say that I struggle with the idea of chosen-ness, because being chosen implies an exclusivity. Yes, I do think God has called and chosen each of one of us for a unique purpose. But God's circle doesn't narrow and collapse inwardly; it broadens and expands outwardly. Finally, I do not believe that one's body needs to be physically altered in any way, shape, or form, whether permanently by something like circumcision, or temporarily by something like baptism, or any state in between, in order for a person to remain in covenant with God.

So, Sardis, rest easy, this morning, we're not gonna talk about transactions. And I'm not going to use this passage as license to claim valuable lands, nor to denote an exclusive tier of righteousness among the most faithful of our gathering. Reading this covenant in a literal way shoehorns ancient needs and norms into a modern context, and quite frankly, such a practice is dangerous.

I do, however, want to see if you can empathize, just a little bit, with these ancient priestly writers. We assume that today's text takes its final form either near the end of the Babylonian exile, or close enough to it, that its trauma is still fresh. Sibley Towner reminds us that the priestly writers were seeking to restore the old-time religion, one contingent on a people, God, and land, living in harmony.

If you've been sacked by raiders, and dragged off to foreign lands, and stripped of your culture and religion, and even when you've returned to your homeland you are still the subjects of foreign rule; then a land, and progeny, and ritual become central to restoring what was lost. And you might advocate for physical alterations, or create strict guidelines for the transfer of land, or find additional practices that set your people apart. Because if you do this, yes, your conquerors might usurp some tangible belongings, but neither Babylon, nor Persia, nor Greece, nor Rome nor any other power can alter your covenant with the divine.

I don't believe that the intent of today's passage was to settle land disputes in the Sinai Peninsula in 2021, nor was it to prove who is really Jewish, and really Christian. I believe that the authors, however flawed their words may strike us in twenty-first century Charlotte, North Carolina, were attempting to remind a people of God's resilience above and beyond a time of exile.

***God is vested in everybody.***

For sure, the Noahic covenant was a bit more humanity-centric. In the narratives of the matriarchs and patriarchs, we focus less on the whole of humanity, and more on specific families. And yet in Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers, we see universal, timeless human stories: romance, betrayal, family drama and family loyalty, trickery, conflict, unity, discovery, and on and on and on. The God of today's covenant is here to stay, with each one of us, whether we're sharing a moment at the supper table, or fighting over a birthright, or settling in a new land. And if you were listening closely, God didn't just bless Abraham, but all those generations that follow. AND God blesses Sarah, too, and those generations that will follow her, too. Father Abraham had many sons (and daughters, and kindred, and others), and many

sons (and daughters, and kindred, and others) had Father Abraham. So let's all praise the Lord. Everybody!

***God is vested in everything.***

Again, the Noahic covenant is more specific and universal in nature, but you can still find God's commitment to broader creation in the Abrahamic covenant. Despite an insistence by many to read portions of this covenant as a deed of the land to Abraham's descendants, I read this as a reminder of God's investment in the whole of creation. If God's blessing allows created people to inhabit created lands, and if covenant people live into God's purposes for the world, which include a stewardship by God's people of God's lands, waters, skies, plants, animals, and other non-human creations, then such a covenant is a protection for the whole of creation. This covenant helps pave the way for the practices of sabbath, both for the land and the people who keep it; Jubilee, which reinforces a constant renewal of people, and land; and the broader Torah, which calls for intentionality in the use of our resources. And taken in the context of return from exile, the covenant hints that it's not just life that's gonna reside in God's people, but God's spirit is also gonna fill the land: the fields, the waters, the cattle will find healing, too! God is vested in everything!

***God is vested in every time.***

Finally, God is vested in every time. A return from exile can only be future-focused. How poignant that this future is revealed in the story of two seasoned citizens, with a combined 170 years of life experience. It's not just that God is gonna be present in any phase of time, be it the Sixth Century B.C.E. or six thousand years from now. God is also present, active, ready to create new things in people of all ages, in any season of life. God will be with God's people in cosmic time, in historical time, in familial time, in personal time, in every time.

So...here we are Sardis Baptist Church, in our own exile of sorts. Pandemic has robbed of us of some our most essential and beloved ways to mark our own covenants, both those with God and one another. Handshakes, anthems, bread-breaking, foot-washing, peace-passing, simply gathering...all of these things are

on hold, or altered significantly by our virtual state of affairs. Now surely, we believe God is more lasting than this season. But if you are like me, you might feel a bit like those earliest believers exiled from the comforts of their faith rituals, and you might wonder how we can play our harps, and sing our songs in foreign lands, or through foreign devices. And how might we seek the hope of God's future, as well as the assurance of God's presence?

When you hear this ancient covenant read aloud today, I hope you'll hear that God is for you, and for everybody. God is committing to being revealed and experienced in each one of you.

And hope you'll hear that this covenant is for the whole of creation. Thriving cities and sacred communities abound in the very places those ancient conquerors sacked. I dare say their wellbeing is due to their awareness and connectedness to larger ecosystems.

And I hope you'll hear that right now, Lent in the middle of a pandemic, is as good a time as any for God to be working in your life, to be bringing about new, and bold, and courageous, and loving things from your unique gifts.

Friends, God has covenanted to be the God of everybody, and everything, and every time. With this assurance, may we seek to berth new things in a season of exile.

May it be so. And may it be soon! Amen.