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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Lent 1

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, there is a recurring theme in the Bible.

There is a recurring theme in God's Written Word that is of the utmost importance.

There is a recurring theme which our readings from the Old Testament throughout this season in Lent will highlight.

There is a recurring theme in our Holy Scriptures which is this idea of covenant.
Covenant.

PAUSE

Now, a covenant, as we may know, is a promise, a pact, an agreement between two parties.

A covenant is an oath, a pledge, a commitment between entities.

A covenant is a bonding or sacred word that is established between two individuals or groups.

That is the definition of covenant. And covenants are all around us.

If we have gone to school or currently go to school, we've been part of a covenant.

Students agree to do their assignments, and teachers agree to teach.

If we have worked in our lives, or if we are still working, we've been part of a covenant.

Employees agree to do the work they were hired to do.

And employers in turn agree to pay their employees.

If we have been married, we know what it is to be part of a covenant.

Spouses agree to be faithful to each other, to be affectionate, to care for each other.

If we have been parents, then again, we have been part of a covenant.

Parents agree to provide and to care for their children.

And children agree to obey and respect their parents.

If we have been a friend to another person, then we have been part of a covenant.

Friends agree to be there for each other, to check-in with each other, and to stick by each other.

Furthermore, because we are citizens we know what it is to be part of a covenant.

As citizens we agree to certain things, like paying our taxes, and abiding by the law.

And the government agrees to provide for our protection and to provide services like public education, social security, unemployment benefits, and medicare.

Covenants are all around. We enter into them all time, perhaps without even realizing it.

When we buy things on-line or get takeout food from a restaurant.

Those merchants agree to provide a product to us.

And we agree to pay for that product.

That is a covenant.

True, it may be a short-lived covenant, but it is still a covenant.

Covenants are all around us in our daily lives and covenants are part of our faith lives.

Covenants abound in the Scriptures.

And throughout this season of Lent we are going to be hearing about those covenants.

PAUSE

Case in point, today our first reading is from Genesis 9:8-17.

And here then is one of those covenant in the Scriptures.

The passage is from the tail-end of the story of Noah and the Flood.

And at this point in the story, the waters that had covered the earth have receded.

And dry land has once more appeared on the face of the earth.

And Noah and his family have disembarked from the ark.

And the animals as well have left the ark.

And God then says to Noah that he is establishing his covenant with him and his descendants.

God makes an agreement with Noah and his family.

God promises never to flood the earth again.

And for good measure, God puts a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant.

And that rainbow, that sign in the sky, will serve as a reminder to God and to humanity.

When God or humans see the rainbow they will remember the covenant, they will remember God's promise.

PAUSE

Now, this story in Genesis 9:8-17, this story about the rainbow was probably a story created to explain why there is such a thing as a rainbow.

Which came first the rainbow or the story, right?

Well, biblical scholars believe that a lot of the stories in the Old Testament were created to explain phenomena that already existed in the lives of our ancestors of the faith.

There was the question, "Why do the animals avoid humans?"

And the ancients created the story of Adam and Eve, and explained that because of their disobedience, God punished Adam and Eve and put enmity between humans and animals.

Then there is the question about “Why farmer and herders didn’t get along in antiquity?”

And the ancients created the story of Cain and Abel.

Cain, who was a tiller, and Abel, who was a herder, were two brothers who didn’t get along, in fact Cain rose up and killed his brother.

And so, that is why there is tension between farmers and herders.

So on and so forth, throughout the Bible.

Many of the stories in the Bible were created to explain some reality the ancients observed.

One can almost picture a child asking their parents about something...

“Why is it like this in our world? Why do I experience such and such? Why do I see such and such? Why? Why? Why?”

And the parents would be armed with the stories of the Bible to explain the reality of the world.

And so, when we read that God promised not to flood the earth again, and that God put the rainbow in the sky to remember the covenant...

When we read this story today, what we are witnessing is the likely creation of a story to explain a natural phenomenon our ancestors observed but didn’t know how to explain except with a story.

This way of seeing the Bible, as a compendium of answers to the “why” questions, shouldn’t make us distrust the truthfulness of the Bible.

It shouldn’t make us reject the teachings of the Bible.

For indeed, there is profound truth in the Bible even if sometimes we struggle with the factuality of the Bible.

Let me say that again, there is profound truth in the Bible even if sometimes the factuality of the Bible may be in question.

PAUSE

With this in mind, I want us to consider the profound truth in our reading from Genesis 9:8-17.

And the profound truth is this: "Covenants are basic to our lives."

"Covenants are even how we understand God to be operating in relation to us."

God makes covenants with God's people.

God makes promises to us, and God keeps those promises.

Why? Why does God keep those promises?

Because for God to do otherwise, would completely undo our belief in God.

If God did not keep God's promises, where would we be?

There would be no relationship at all between God and God's people.

God keeps God's promises, otherwise there is no need for us to worship God, or to pray to God, or to show any sort of devotion to God.

God keeps God's promises.

If there is nothing else to take from this sermon today...it is that.

God keeps God's promises. You can take that to the bank, as they say.

But there is also another profound truth in this passage from Genesis.

God also likes to attach a sign to God's promises.

That is why we get this big, beautiful thing in the sky called a rainbow.

It is a sign of God's promise not to flood the earth again.

PAUSE

As humans we seem to crave signs. We put rings on our fingers as a sign of marriage.

We frame our diplomas, and put them on our walls, as a sign of our education.

Some people like to wear expensive bling, or drive expensive cars, as a sign of their wealth.

And just this past Wednesday, many people put a black cross on their forehead as an outward sign of their penitence.

So, yes, we are people who live by covenants and we are people who crave signs.

Signs help us to see something visually. Signs help us to say something about ourselves.

And just as WE embrace the idea of covenants and utilize signs in OUR lives, so does God.

PAUSE

Almost two months ago, at the time of Christmas, we celebrated the fact that God keeps God's promise to send us a Savior.

Christmas is about God honoring God's promise in the OT to send us the Messiah.

And God's promise was fulfilled with a sign.

Gabriel told the shepherds, "This will be a sign to you. You will find the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

The child Jesus was the sign of God keeping God's promise.

To be sure, we can trust God to keep God's promises.

PAUSE

So God gave us this child Jesus, God gave us this sign at Christmas, and now as we enter this season of Lent, we will observe God keeping another promise, that is, to save us from our sins.

This is God's covenant promise to God's people to redeem us from our sin.

And the sign of that promised redemption is the cross.

It is the cross by which we marked, tattooed if you will...

It is the cross that is traced on our foreheads in baptism.

We, you and I, have been marked with the very sign of God's promise of redemption.

Jesus Christ will fulfill God's promise on the cross.

Jesus Christ will die that sin and the power of death have no more dominion over us.

Jesus Christ will be nailed to what was a grotesque sign of Roman execution, and because Christ is nailed to that cross, the cross becomes transformed as a sign, which we boldly wear as a necklace, or boldly display in our homes, or boldly acknowledge as baptized people.

The cross marks us with God's saving power, such you and I are now signs of God's redemption, because we wear the cross on our persons.

But, we are signs of God's redemption most truly because of the way we live our lives embodying God's love and grace.

We are signs of God's promised redemption, because we live our lives differently now.

We live lives of love and grace.

Yes, we are people who live by covenants and who crave signs, and our God is a God who makes covenants and who uses signs, a rainbow in the sky, a child in a manger, a man nailed to a cross, and yes people, whom he has empowered by the Spirit to love.

We thank God today and every day for the signs of grace and love we have been made to be.

We thank God by being his signs in the world. Amen.