**A Pilgrimage of Hope: Starting with Covenant**

**Genesis 9:8-17**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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When my step-kids were growing up, and again when Emily was young, we would go for what we called “Signs of Spring” walks. One Saturday late in March, we would head out to a metro park and walk through the woods searching for anything that might be a sign that spring was coming. It might be a little bit of green poking out of the leaves and dirty snow or tiny buds on a bush or the branches of a tree. We might see a robin flitting from tree to tree or even the first blooms of hepatica on the forest floor.

If you’ve spent very many winters in Michigan, you know that March can be a very long month. After three months or more of cold and grey, March, with its damp, gloomy days, seems to go on forever. What keeps us going is the promise of spring, the promise that the sun will come out, the grass will return to green, the flowers burst with joy, and the birds and all the other living beings in God’s creation come back to fill our world with life and energy and hope.

We’ve just begun the season of Lent and, frankly, sometimes Lent can seem a bit like March. With its emphasis on personal reflection and repentance, Lent can feel long and dreary. The idea is to spend these forty days, six weeks not counting the Sundays, acknowledging the ways we have turned away from God and turning back to God again. Turning away from all that is destructive and turning toward love. Like spring is the promise that keeps us going through March, love is the promise to keep us going through Lent. Love and resurrection.

And so, there is joyful irony that the very day we started the season of Lent was Saint Valentine’s Day, the day we celebrate love. There is painful irony that it was the same day a nineteen-year-old young man walked into a Florida high school and killed seventeen people with a semi-automatic rifle.

For many of us, this has been another difficult week in a long series of difficult weeks or months. We have faced the agonizing illness of someone we love or the death of a significant person in our lives or congregation. We’ve seen a country in turmoil. We’ve learned of yet another school shooting. Choosing to enter into the kind of self-reflection that we’re called to in Lent can feel like too much. It’s so much easier to stay the course, our vision narrow, our hearts numb to however God is stirring within them.

Yet, I firmly believe that right now, this year, in the midst of chaos and grief, bewilderment and avoidance, right now is when we need to embrace the gifts that Lent offers us. The purpose of Lent in the church calendar is to take six weeks to declutter our souls, to sweep the cobwebs from our hearts, to exercise our voices, to find our courage so that we can fully embrace the promise of a new beginning that is the promise of Easter.

Lent is a time when we can get bogged down in our own guilt or inadequacy, but as people who follow Jesus, we are a people of hope. We are sustained and strengthened by the stories of hope passed down from one generation of Christ-followers to the next. And so I invite you to consider this Lent not only a time to face your own demons or to name the forces of destruction that are at work in the world, but also a time to make a journey, a journey toward the resurrection, a pilgrimage of hope.

Of course, “A Pilgrimage of Hope” is the theme of our Lenten programming this year, particularly the congregation-wide art project that Debbie just spoke about in which any one, two, or more of us can create a work of art that explores a part of the passion story. The passion story, the story of Jesus’ last days on earth, is full of darkness, full of the worst that humans can do to each other. It reminds us that we cannot turn our backs to how difficult life can be – full of grief and shame and feelings of helplessness in the face of fear and hate.

Of course, we have to go through facing our own demons and the dark side of humanity in order to fully embrace the miracle of Easter. And yet, there are seeds of hope planted throughout our faith story and even the passion story – and we need those seeds to sustain us during these days of Lent as we wait for spring and the joy of new life to come. That’s why Doug and I are beginning a new sermon series for Lent, a series in which we will look for the hope woven throughout our Christian story – even in the story of Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion.

Today, we’re going to start with what is the foundation of our hope– God’s covenant with us to love us, to offer us grace, to stay beside us and seek what is good for us. How many of you have taken a Disciple One class? For those who don’t know, Disciple is a small group Bible study in which you read most of the Bible in a year and meet weekly to discuss it. I don’t know if it’s still true, but when I took Disciple years ago, the curriculum was largely built around the theme of covenant because the whole biblical story is built around covenants. God makes a covenant with Adam, with Abraham, with David, and, of course, the two covenants we hear about in our two scripture readings for today.

The first of these is God’s covenant with Noah and his sons. The story goes that humanity, God’s amazing experiment with free will, became so evil that in deep sadness and frustration, God gave up on us and decided to flood the world with forty days of rain. First, though, he instructed Noah to build an ark for himself, his family, and two of each kind of animal to keep them safe when the storms began. Forty days later, after all the world is laid to waste, God sees the destruction and regrets causing the flood, which leads God to make a covenant to never flood the world again, to never destroy creation. Of course, the sign of that covenant is the rainbow.

One of the beautiful things about this covenant is that it is not limited to a covenant between God and the Jewish people or even God and humanity. It is a covenant between God and all that is living – a covenant that promises that God is always seeking to be in relationship with us. A covenant that means God stands by us, and even when we stray, God doesn’t seek our destruction but waits for us to return.

The implications of this are huge. Because of this covenant, we can trust that the difficult things that happen in our lives, the hurricanes and wildfires, the cancer diagnosis or death of a loved one, these things are not God’s punishment on us for the mistakes we’ve made. They just happen – and God promises to be with us when they happen.

And that means that as you enter into this season of Lent and you look at all that is wrong in the world, you don’t need to fear that God has deserted us. God’s covenant with Noah reminds us that God is steadfast and there is nothing we can do, individually or corporately, that will lead God to turn away from us, to give up on us. There is always hope because God is always there.

Which leads us to the second scripture reading from today – the story of how Jesus began his ministry – his baptism, his temptation in the wilderness, and his declaration that the time to usher in the kingdom of God had come. This story is at the heart of another covenant, perhaps the most important covenant for Christians, the new covenant initiated by God with us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The new covenant is God’s promise of grace, the promise of forgiveness, the promise that each of us, like Jesus, is God’s beloved, exactly as we are from before we are born and into eternity.

Like the covenant God made with Noah, the new covenant creates a foundation for us to be hopeful. We may feel deeply-flawed, most of us are. We may feel inadequate to face all of the needs our world has today – and, alone, we are. We may feel that every day we are tempted, like Jesus in the wilderness, to embrace wealth or power or status rather than the way of Christ – and, in fact, we are.

But (I had to throw one “but” in there for Doug’s sake), the covenant God makes with each of us, the new covenant we enter into when we are baptized, promises us that we are loved by God no matter how flawed we are or inadequate we feel or tempted we become. We are loved by God period. Always.

There is, of course, another side to the covenant – what we promise to God. Those promises are found in our baptism liturgy. We promise to turn away from evil, to trust in and follow Jesus, and to be faithful to God and the church. All of those promises are summarized in the new commandment that Jesus gave us along with the new covenant – that we love one another as he loves us.

This brings me back around to Ash Wednesday which was also Valentine’s Day which was also the day seventeen people were shot to death in Parkland, Florida. Friends, our world is full of fear, full of hate, full of guns, full of brokenness. We can’t sit and wait and watch from the sidelines. We have a covenant with God – a covenant of love. We are loved by God, and we are called to love – called to love with our strength and our courage and our voices and, above all, our hope. Hope for the warmth of spring to return, hope that all that is dark and gloomy and grey will be overcome by light, hope that the power of love can outlast the power of hate, hope in the everlasting promise of a new beginning, hope in the vision of the kingdom of God. The pilgrimage of hope begins with us, God’s covenant people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.