

The Covenant of Baptism

Text: Genesis 9: 8-17; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 22, 2021

So, yeah. Each week things feel like they're going a little further off the rails. As I was writing this there was a bomb threat at the Library of Congress and in Times Square and a truck was on fire in the middle of San Francisco's Bay Bridge. Winchester was (and is) back under a mandatory mask mandate for indoor spaces, tropical storm Fred had just dumped a pile of rain and we were under a tornado warning. And Hurricane Henri is rolling into New England. Today. With multiple disasters in Haiti, the turmoil and fear in Afghanistan, and there being not a single ICU bed left in the entire state of Alabama due to Covid; it's a lot to process.

But we aren't the first to live in cataclysmic times, and the people of God since the days of Noah have preserved a concept that can provide an anchor for distressing times both great and small. That concept is called "Covenant" and we'll celebrate a form of it shortly in the specifically Christian covenant of baptism. But to really understand what a covenant is, we have to go back to the earliest human societies—to the days when there were stories of great floods that swept away everything and those who survived wondered how to move on from there.

Anthropologists tell us that the earliest humans were organized in family units and the rules of society were based on kinship. Nothing more was needed when the earth's population was small. We see that throughout the stories of Genesis—from Adam and Eve on through Abraham and his descendants. Everyone's safety, security, care, and provision came from their own flesh and blood—or, as the idiom was in ancient Near Eastern society, "bone and flesh." When Adam looks at Eve in Genesis 2:23 and says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" he is using kinship language. He is recognizing her as family.

And that's how societies were structured for thousands of years. Even as late as the stories of Abraham, which scholars say are set somewhere around 2,000 BCE, family members mostly married each other. Abraham marries his niece, Sarah. His grandson Jacob marries two of his cousins, as well as several of their servants. But as the earth's population grew, kinship became more difficult to manage, as anyone with in-laws can tell you. As populations started to move around and inevitably began to marry outside of even the very extended family, they had a problem. Is this new spouse from a different bloodline considered family? When family is the only structure for protection and care; being able to identify who is and is not family is a life and death matter.

The answer to that problem was to give a marriage additional meaning. It became more than just a union, but a covenant. With this added element, the couple would take vows of protection and support and present a physical sign in the presence of witnesses, so that all would know that the family obligations and circle of care were extended to the new spouse.

Every covenant is some version of that—a way to extend the privileges and responsibilities of a particular family to someone currently outside of it. Expanding the family is a serious matter—you are entrusting the new family members with your life and safety and you'll have to pony up to care for them, too. So covenant comes with a standard set of vows, visible signs that are widely recognized, and the whole thing is witnessed and affirmed by the community.

Covenants are different from contracts. Contracts are agreements that might include some of the same provisions that exist in a covenant, but without the understanding of any special bond. If someone breaks a contract there might be anger, lawsuits, or even a war. But the breaking of a contract doesn't affect your basic sense of identity, because establishing a contract has not made you a family. Churches are based in covenant, which is why church conflicts hit people so much harder than conflicts at the office. You have a contract with your employer. You have a covenant relationship when you join a church.

Christians didn't invent religious covenants; we inherited them from our faith parent, Judaism. What the particular faith of the ancient Israelites brought to the world's religious table, and that was passed directly into the DNA of Christianity, was an understanding of a God who desired to be in covenant relationship with human beings. That was radically different than the religions of the surrounding peoples of the time. Israel's God didn't look for groveling worshippers like the gods of Babylon or Egypt, but instead wanted to expand the divine family to include all that God had made.

And that radical idea wasn't a late development for Judaism. That kind of covenant is what we get at the end of the Noah story in Genesis 9 and is one of the things that makes the Bible's flood story different than, for example, the epic of Gilgamesh or the other flood myths of the time. After the flood in Genesis, God takes a vow never again to destroy the earth with water (Do you hear that, Henri?). That promise is witnessed by Noah and his family, and God provides a sign to go with it—the bow in the clouds.

God establishes a covenant with Noah and all his descendants. And since, Noah and his family are the only ones left on the earth at that point in the story, the implication is that God's family extends to all humans. But it's not just humans. That first-ever religious covenant in Israel is between God and every living creature of the earth. It establishes kinship—an intimate family bond and the obligation of mutual care—between God, humans, and everything that lives and breathes. In the Genesis version of the flood story, God and all earthly life are joined in a family of mutual love and care; of privilege and obligation. In the theology of Genesis, God makes promises to the world and not just the other way around.

The covenant between God and all living things in Genesis 9 stretches across time and space like the rainbow that signifies it. As other covenants are established in the Bible, they exist beneath that bow in the clouds that continues to declare us all kindred. Underneath that rainbow sits the covenant God made specifically with Abraham and his descendants; a covenant with a sign cut into the flesh of men. Later came a behavioral covenant, offered first by Moses to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai but available to all who vow to live by the Ten Commandments. As we talked about two weeks ago, the sign of *that* covenant is the keeping of the Sabbath.

Christians also have a covenant that is particular to us, while still remaining within the rainbow family of the earth. That covenant is baptism—when the Church extends our offer of family privilege and responsibility to all those willing to live by its vows. Baptism, whether it happens at birth or later in life, marks the beginning of the Christian journey. When we baptize a young child, it's technically the parents and godparents or other sponsors who are taking the covenant vows, with the child having a chance to “confirm” that covenant for themselves when they get older.

We also recognize baptism as a “sacrament,” which is our way of saying we believe that God actually shows up in the moment of baptism—a means for even the youngest infant to experience God’s grace. Baptism as a sacrament proclaims that you don’t have to pass some kind of a test to earn God’s love. In this act, we profess that God is here to help mark the beginning of a child’s faith journey, available to help both parents and child when the going gets rough. As it will.

Baptism as *sacrament* is about the person being baptized. Baptism as *covenant* is also about the baptized, when that person is old enough to understand and take the vows themselves. But before that, the *covenant* of baptism recognizes the parents and godparents or other sponsors as the guide for the first leg of the child’s faith journey, until they are old enough to understand and “confirm” that covenant for themselves.

But either way, those who are baptized become part of the extended Christian family, either on their own or through the agency of their parents or sponsors. And, during the ceremony, the congregation of a local church stands in for Christians everywhere to affirm, witness, and welcome our new covenant members. We also witness a baptism to remember and recommit to the vows we ourselves have taken. In doing so, the entire body is strengthened, which is why we don’t do private baptisms.

The church is the family of the baptized. That doesn’t remove us from the first covenant between God and all living things, and it doesn’t make us better than those who have other covenant relationships that are particular to them. What baptism marks is the beginning of a specifically Christian journey, and we who are on that road pledge our care and support to the baptized, both children and adults, as part of our particular family within the larger covenant of God’s rainbow love for the world.

As an example of what that means in practice, I want to share a story from the church I served in Dover, NH. To date I have never been prouder of a congregation I’ve served than I was of them in the moment their vows to become the family of the baptized took concrete form.

One Sunday a member of the congregation stood up to ask for prayers for Sarah, his teenage daughter. Sarah had struggled with anorexia for quite some time and had been in and out of a number of hospitals and treatment centers. Nothing had worked. As he choked back tears, he said that she was now literally starving to death to the point where they were checking her vital signs daily. The only thing they hadn’t tried was a treatment center in Arizona that used equine therapy. It had a reputation as the Cadillac of care for eating disorders. But they were not a Cadillac family and, even if they put their house on the market the next day to pay for it, Sarah didn’t have that much time. He wasn’t asking for money, just for prayers, as he and his wife helplessly watched their first-born child slip away.

I spoke to him after the service to see what the treatment would cost. \$25,000. That number resonated with me. It was early in the calendar year and, after several years of deficit budgets, we had managed to right the ship and had climbed up to a budget surplus at the end of the prior year. That surplus was \$25,000. But it wasn’t a surplus at the moment; it had been allocated to the current year’s budget. Church Council convened Sunday afternoon. Sarah didn’t have time for a fundraising drive. Could we just give them the money? There were objections; and we had a fairly heated discussion. “That wasn’t ‘extra’ money,” some said. “What sort of precedent were we setting?”

“She’s been through treatment many times already. What if this doesn’t work either?” But, Sarah wasn’t just a child of that father and mother. By virtue of her baptism, Sarah was our child. When we welcomed that family into our church, they became our family. **Their** child wasn’t dying; **our** child was dying.

By Tuesday morning we were able to give the family a check for \$25,000 and members had donated enough of their airline miles that we could fly the whole family from New Hampshire to Arizona. They arrived at the ranch by mid-week. Perhaps the horses recognized that, by virtue of God’s rainbow covenant with all living things, Sarah was part of their herd, too; but whatever it was, it worked. Ten years ago this past June, I choked back tears as I joined Sarah and her husband in the covenant of marriage. Last month, their second child was born. Happy and healthy all of them. I have shared the story with her permission.

And the cherry on top? At the end of that calendar year—after pulling out \$25,000 from the budget and creating a significant deficit yet again—the church, again, ended with a surplus.

That’s what covenant means—to extend the privileges and responsibilities of family by taking vows that are witnessed by others and signified in a material way. All covenants have visible signs, and the sign of the baptismal covenant is water. Apparently, God is so pleased to have the Schiappas join the family that an entire hurricane’s worth of water is showing up for the occasion! As we baptize Elizabeth Ruth Schiappa today and receive her parents Andrew and Ginny into membership at Crawford, we will signify that particular Christian covenant with water from this font. But do watch the sky over the next day or two. When Henri passes; somewhere, there will be a rainbow. Amen.