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Worship Theme:
“God’s Covenant Promised to Noah, & What Jesus Said”

“Never Again”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
First Sunday of Lent, February 21, 2021
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Genesis 9:8-17 Matthew 24:36-42

Genesis 9: 8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Matthew 24: 36-42

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the [Creator].

For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left.

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

SERMON

Drew Jubera lives a stone's throw from here.
Drew Jubera writes for fun and for the movies.
His series on young football players and their lives,
 called *LAST CHANCE U*, is quite popular on Netflix.
Jubera also teaches writers to write.
He says, "*Start with a scene already begun, already in formation,
 then, before the scene is over, make your exit.*"

That's exactly what we have here before us.

As we enter into the scene
 we overhear Jesus Christ speaking with the whole people of God.
 He is right in the middle of a message,
 one that is building, building, building,
 and then suddenly, Jesus exits early,
 intentionally,
 leaving you and me, us, to decide how it all ends.

Listen for the Word of God:

*"But about that day and hour no one knows,
 neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the [Creator].
For as the days of Noah were,
 so will be the coming of the Son of Man.
For as in those days before the flood
 they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,
 until the day Noah entered the ark,
 and they knew nothing
 until the flood came
 and swept them all away,
so too will be the coming of the Son of Man."* (Matthew 24: 36-38)

Jesus declares from the outset
 and comes back 'round to the fact
 that the hour of the Son of Man's coming is unknown.

Let's state right now that the truth of the matter is
 that if Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
 and all of God's angels and messengers
 do not know the hour of the end of times,
 then stop your worrying.

Let it go.

If God is not going to tell Jesus,

God is not going to tell you

because this is not for you or me to know, or be concerned about,
much less any soul with the arrogance or ignorance
to believe they have the inside track.

We overhear Jesus talking about this subject,

the subject of the eschaton, the Day of Judgment,

because Jesus wants us to be ready,

to be on track and on the case about what God wills for us,
to be ever aware and grateful of the promise of God.

When we think about the promise of God,

our minds harken back to the story of Noah and his family

and the Covenant God made with them,

the rainbow that God cast across the sky as a reminder...

...a reminder not for us!

Every rainbow is a reminder for God's own self,

that when God sees a rainbow in the clouds

God will remember the promise God made:

"When I bring clouds over the earth

and the bow is seen in the clouds,

I will remember my covenant that is between me and you

and every living creature of all flesh;

and the waters shall never again become a flood

to destroy all flesh."

God said to Noah and his sons,

"I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,

and with every living creature that is with you,

the birds, the domestic animals,

and every animal of the earth with you,

as many as came out of the ark.

I establish my covenant with you,

that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood,

and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

Never again!

Never again shall all flesh be cut off...

...cast away, discarded, disconnected from the Holy.

This is covenant language.

(following notes from Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B, P. 136-137)

Covenants are sworn agreements.

Vows are made in public,

made to be kept,

kept between God and humanity, or between human beings.

For example, the Christian Church affirms that we have a covenantal relationship
between our congregations, regional church, and the general church.

We vowed in public worship to work and serve in Christ, together.

Covenants are not contracts.

Contracts are sworn agreements, attested to by witnesses, enforceable by law.

Covenants are different.

Covenants are sacred, relational, hopeful.

God made a covenant on Mt. Sinai with the Hebrew people:

"I will be your God and you shall be my people."

Covenants involve a promise.

Covenants have stipulations.

Observe that in Genesis 9,

in God's covenant promised before Noah and his sons,

first God makes a covenant with all future generations.

Furthermore, God includes in the covenant all the creatures of the earth.

And in this act of grace, only one party speaks: God.

Noah nor his sons say a single word; no comment is necessary.

So first this covenant originated from God,

furthermore only God speaks,

and finally, neither Noah nor any future generation

nor any creature of the earth

has to earn it or deserve it,

be worthy of it or accept it

deny it or even respond to it.

Alleluia! Thank God.

God, in the all-time ultimate act of grace and love, makes a promise:

"Never again.

Never again will I cut off all flesh...

I make this covenant with all future generations."

The scope and range of the promise of God is cosmic.

God's promise to all generations is universal, transformational, relational.

And should God ever forget, after it rains there will be a rainbow to remind the Lord.

Jesus grasps that He is the fulfillment
of the essence, the foundational, unconditional love
of God's covenant with humanity and all the earth.

Yet, when we unpack Jesus' teaching...

- His prescient exegesis of the story of Noah's divine encounter with God,
- His parabolic preparation for our journey with Him to the Cross,
- His moral courage to show us the only way to love & life eternal,
- His urgent call to love God and to love one another...

...when we unpack and dig into Jesus' teaching
that He is the One we wait for, look to, hope for, pray to,
welcome into our lives and loses and loves,
we discern a mystery and a magic and a might
shaped by a promise,
a blessed promise,
a promise of something more,
a promise worthy to be renewed,
a promise made manifest in Christ Himself.

Jesus goes back into Genesis and pulls this story forward and lays it before us.

***For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking,
marrying and giving in marriage,
until the day Noah entered the ark,
and they knew nothing
until the flood came and swept them all away,
so too will be the coming of the Son of Man."***

Here Jesus points out what should be obvious
yet is so often missed or misunderstood.

Here's a people, going through life, just as we are moving along.

He wonders, what did they know before they became a people, interrupted,
interrupted by a sudden end?

*"[Jesus'] comparison with the days of Noah
is [not that that generation was any more wicked than anyone else;]
but that life was going on as usual,
with no striking or mysterious signs
of the approaching judgment."*

*Jesus considers the tale of Noah and his neighbors and says,
the people did "not know,"
a theme [Jesus repeats and] emphasizes..."*

*“What the [followers of God] do know is not the time of the end,
[points out Jesus,]
but that it could come at any time,
and thus the urgency
of active engagement in their assigned mission.”*

--Fred Craddock, Eugene Boring, P. 92

And what, pray tell, did they know?
What did they know was their assigned mission?

What was it that Jesus was building to
as he reminded them of Noah and his neighbors,
reminding his disciples and followers
and those overhearing,
tuning in with half an ear from around the corner,
telling everyone and anyone who will listen,
listen! stay awake! be ready!
be ready for...for what?

What was Jesus building to,
as He preached Good News to God's people,
telling them, telling us to stay awake,
be ready for the end of times,
the apocalypse,
the coming eschaton,
the Parousia,
the revelation of the Lord of Heaven and Earth,
the return of the Son of Man,
the Day of Judgment,
the Great Banquet,
the Second Coming of Christ,
a misty future with as many titles as unanswered questions,
as much wonderment as sharp-edged meanings,
a future clouded and shrouded in mystery.

Jesus builds and builds a message on a foundation of solid rock:
Be ready.
Watch!
Stay attuned and at work and play with your assigned missions!

*“We are such a people, interrupted,
like Noah, like his neighbors.
We've been storm tossed, tempest tossed,
uncertain about what will come,
yet faithfully trusting God to see us through
as we gather to walk and talk,*

*to share our stories and our souls,
covenanting to walk together,
prayerfully, faithfully, honestly,
to hold each other's grief and sorrow
as well as to share in laughter and joy.*

*We have this hope,
seeing rainbows,
trusting God sees them first,
remembering that we shall never again,
never again be cut off or cast away or left bereft,
like walking in silent prayer among 15,000 tiny white flags
planted on a church lawn,
signs of devastation and deliverance,
helping us to remember,
to act, to live out our assigned missions."*

(Quinn Stevenson, adapted)

Jesus Christ, bound and determined to bring home His point and His prayer,
making it clear as a rainbow coming out of the clouds,
follows His commentary on Noah and the promise of God
with 3 parables on what we should expect in the end...
what we should expect in the end,
because the end is truly a beginning.

(1) Matthew 24: 45-51

A servant is authorized by the master of the house
to feed the hungry household while the master is away.
The master is pleased when the household is fed and rested,
and thanks and honors the servant.
But when master departs a second time,
the servant deviates and ignores the household,
who in turn grow hungry and are in want.
When the master returns at an unexpected hour,
the servant is cast with those who weep and gnash their teeth.

(2) Matthew 25: 1-13

The kingdom of God is like 10 bridesmaids who went to meet the bridegroom.
5 take extra oil for their lamps, 5 do not.
The hour grew late for he was delayed.
At midnight, a cry arises: *Awake! He is arriving!*
Those without enough oil for their lamps
had to depart and hurriedly go off in search of more.
When they returned at last,
the door to the feast was shut, and they were left outside.

(3) Matthew 26: 31-46

In a third, climatic parable,
when the Son of Man returns, said Jesus,

the King-Judge will call all the peoples of all the nations before Him.
In the end,
it comes down to whether we stayed awake, aware, watchful,
ever attuned to our assigned mission.

In the end,
God grades on a curve,
like the curve of the ark of a rainbow.

In the end,
it's never too late or too early to turn your life around and toward Big Love.
The Promise of God's covenant will never again be broken,
will always be given unconditionally,
has been fulfilled through the love of Christ,
is absolutely made manifest by the love we give.

In the end,
the King-Judge will ask only once.
When I was thirsty, did you give me something to drink?
When I was hungry, did you feed me?
When I was naked, did you clothe me?
When I was sick or in prison, did you visit me?
When I was a stranger, did you welcome me?
"Lord, Lord, when were you thirsty or hungry,
naked or sick, in prison or a stranger?"
*"Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these
my brothers and sisters and neighbors, you did it to me."*

Now, that is a promise.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!