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Genesis 9:8-17

32nd Message

Bernard Bell

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UNDER THE RAINBOW

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Genesis is a book of beginnings, a story of origins. It begins with God—not the beginning of God, but God himself. In the beginning he is already there, uncreated and the creator of everything else. He created the heavens and the earth, fashioning a world with both form and content. He filled this world with life, creating living creatures to fill the sky, the sea and the land. He blessed them, commanding them, “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth” (1:22). Finally he created a special form of life: human beings to be his image-bearers in the world and to rule and steward his creation on his behalf. These, too, he blessed and commanded, “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth” (1:28). At the end of six days he looked over all that he had made, and, behold, it was all very good; it was exactly what he intended it to be.

Genesis 1 gives us the beginning of the biblical narrative. The story begins with creation, with the creation of life. But the story is not complete with only a beginning; it needs a middle and an end. But barely has the story got going than it suffers a train wreck, or rather a series of train wrecks. These get worse and worse until after only ten generations God the Creator announces the end: “I am going to put an end to all life” (6:13). This announcement is emphatic, beginning with the phrase “The end of all life.” Imagine you’re watching this as a movie. You’ve settled in, expecting a three-hour show. Two opening scenes about the creation of life set up the story. Then come some brief tumultuous scenes: expulsion from the garden, murder of a brother. Then God appears on camera for a speech. The first words out of his mouth: “The End!” The end of all life! How can the story end so soon? It’s barely gotten going! What went wrong? You want your money back.

Humanity began to multiply upon the earth, as God intended, but this brought a multiplication of human wickedness upon the earth (6:1, 5). God looked and instead of seeing that it was all very good, he saw that the earth was ruined (6:12). So he decided to wipe the earth clean with the waters of the Flood. No ordinary flood this, but a unique Flood, one triumphant enough to overwhelm the earth, covering the highest mountains and returning the earth to its original blank state. But not quite: atop the waters, supported on this ‘whelming Flood, floated a box filled with life.

Prior to sending the Flood, God had taken Noah into his confidence, revealing his plan and giving Noah a part to play. First in general terms: “I am surely going to destroy both them [all flesh] and the earth. So make yourself an ark” (6:13-14). Then more specifically, “I am going to bring floodwaters upon the earth to destroy all life... But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark” (6:17-18). Noah’s part was to first build the ark and then enter into it together with a sample of the living creatures to keep them alive. In this ark God kept Noah and the animals with him alive while he wiped the earth clean, while he undid creation.

Did this solve the problem of human wickedness? No! Human wickedness remained unchanged. Before the Flood, “The Lord saw

how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (6:5). This human evil was grounds for divine judgment. After the Flood, he pronounced that “every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood” (8:21). This time human evil was grounds for divine mercy, as God promised, “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans.” And we must place ourselves into that analysis. The evil inclination of our human hearts is grounds for both judgment and mercy.

Nevertheless, despite this ongoing human wickedness, when Noah emerged from the ark, God commissioned him to be the new Adam. Just as he had blessed Adam, so he blessed Noah, commanding him, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth,” repeating the command a few verses later, “As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it” (9:1, 7). Here is a new beginning. But what hope does Noah have that this beginning will move on into a middle and an end? What hope do we have, as those watching the movie, that the story will end successfully? After all, the root cause of the abrupt first end has not been resolved.

Noah’s hope, and our hope also, rests in a promise which God makes. After he came out of the ark, Noah built an altar on which he offered burnt offerings to the Lord. We read the Lord’s response.

The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.” (8:21)

The pleasing aroma was literally an “aroma that put at rest.” The Lord was put at rest not by destroying sinful life, which he had done, nor by resolving human evil, which he had not done, but by graciously accepting a sacrifice, which Noah had done. That’s pure grace. And then he made a determination in his own heart: Never again! “Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings...And never again will I destroy all living creatures.” He backed this up with a promise to himself to keep creation working:

**“As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
day and night
will never cease.” (8:22)**

These resolutions were made in the privacy of God’s own heart. Now, in the final episode of the flood narrative, he expresses this inner resolve to Noah. He solemnly declares to Noah the promise which he had made in his own heart. Our story-teller has broken this declaration into three separate speeches (9:8-11, 12-16, 17).

God's Covenant with Noah (9:8-11)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Gen 9:8-11 TNIV)

This speech picks up much of the language of God's speech to Noah before the Flood (6:13-21). Prior to the Flood God had announced to Noah, "I will establish my covenant with you (singular)" (6:18). Now he establishes that covenant, but in a more comprehensive manner. It will be not only with Noah but with "you" (plural), signifying his sons as well; with "your descendants after you," that is, with all humanity; indeed, "with every living creature." This is stated most emphatically: the word "all" or "every" is used twelve times in verses 8-17 to indicate the totality of animal life that is included under this covenant.

This is the first of many covenants in Scripture. Some of these covenants are between two human partners: for example, Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:27), the Gibeonites with Joshua (Josh 9:6-16), Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18:3), Solomon and Hiram, the king of Tyre (1 Kgs 5:21). Most of these covenants are between two equal parties; they are mutual agreements. Such covenants are essentially treaties; indeed, NIV usually translates the term as "make a treaty." The term is still used today in a similar manner. On Friday I participated in a wedding. The bride and groom, as equal parties, made vows, promises to each other. They are now bound together in the covenant of marriage in the eyes of both God and state.

But there is another set of covenants, in which God is a partner. These covenants are manifestly not between two equal partners, for who can be an equal partner with God in any negotiations? These covenants are not founded on any negotiations. Instead, they are solemn declarations of God's plans, in which he binds himself to a particular course of action. They are solemnizations of his promises; the making or the establishment of the covenant begins the actualization of promises which have already been made. These covenants are usually unilateral, initiated and enacted by one side, God's side, though to the great benefit of the other side. Since the primary recipient of this first covenant is Noah, it is often labeled the Noahic covenant. But we see that it is with far more than simply Noah; it is with all life. God has already made the promise in his own heart. Now begins the actualization of that promise.

This first covenant contains two promises. Both are in the negative: not what God will do, but what he will not do. A double "never again" to match the double "never again" of his inner resolve. Both reverse decisions which he made before the Flood. Prior to the Flood, God said "I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life" (6:17). Now he promises, "Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood." Additional weight is added by the second promise: "Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." Now it is evident that there have been plenty of floods since then, and that these floods have caused tremendous loss of life, largely because people now live in floodplains as if they were not floodplains. God is not promising that there will be no more floods, but no more Flood—the word used for "Flood" is unique to this one event.

These promises are totally one-sided. God does not ask Noah to do anything; he lays no obligation upon him. The validity of these promises does not depend upon any human cooperation. God will keep these promises no matter what, ongoing human sin notwithstanding. Never again will he undo creation and start over. But is God's word enough? Can we rely on that word? In his second speech he backs up his word with a sign.

The Sign of the Covenant (9:12-16)

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." (9:12-16)

Why is a sign necessary? Promises are words, and words are invisible; they can be forgotten. A sign is something visible. It is not itself the promise, but it points to the promise. In Friday's wedding the bride and groom exchanged rings immediately after their vows. The rings are signs. They point to something else: to the vows. When the couple look at their rings they are to remember their covenant vows, their promises to one another.

The sign that God chooses for his covenant with Noah is a rainbow in the clouds. We now understand how the rainbow works, that it's produced by the refraction of light through water droplets. White light is refracted into a full spectrum, though we still follow Newton's convention of recognizing seven colors. But our understanding of the physics hasn't reduced the rainbow to the ordinary. The ancient world must have marveled at the appearance of the rainbow after a storm. And we still find rainbows magical; we stop and reach for our cameras. Though the laws of physics are involved, it is clear that God is still sovereign over creation: he is the one who beclouds the earth with clouds. He has arranged physics so that light is refracted into a spectrum, so that a rainbow is seen against the dark storm clouds.

But the rainbow isn't primarily for us. It's for God to see, not us! When he sees the rainbow he will remember his covenant with all life, his covenant with his creation. Of course it works as a sign for us as well, reminding us that God remembers. God will be true to his promise, which he restates: "Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." He will allow the storms to come only so far, and then no further.

Finally God gives a third short speech, briefly summarizing both the covenant and its sign.

So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth." (9:17)

At the beginning of his first speech God announced, "I am about to establish my covenant." Now, by the third speech, it is clear that the covenant has been established, not just with Noah or his sons or his descendants after him, but with all life on the earth.

This proclamation of the covenant has been a long-winded affair. We could have adequately summarized it much more briefly. But would that have been adequate? Certain things are emphasized

by this long-windedness. This lengthy set of three speeches allows God to use the word “covenant” exactly seven times. Can that be accidental? Great emphasis is attached to the universality of the beneficiaries: that twelve-fold use of “all” to emphasize the totality of life. Furthermore, the parties to the covenant are expressed in five different ways: “between me and you and every living creature with you,” “between me and the earth,” “between me and you and all living creatures of every kind,” “between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth,” “between me and all life on the earth” (9:12-17). This further emphasizes the totality of life that is covered under the covenant.

Since this is the final episode of the flood narrative, let me expand this point to cover the whole narrative. If we were telling the story, we would not place the emphasis in the same places. If we were the director of the movie, we would have shot it differently. The narrative begins and ends with a lengthy monologue from God to Noah, both rather repetitious. At the beginning God takes Noah into his confidence (6:13-21). He tells Noah his plan, and commands him to build an ark and enter into it, using the verb “enter” three times. We would then devote much attention to the building of the ark, but that no-doubt lengthy event is covered with the simple statement, “Noah did everything just as God commanded him” (6:22). Next, much attention is given to the entrance into the ark (7:1-16), an event we would consider of lesser importance. The narrative is again repetitious, so repetitious that the verb “enter” is used another seven times for a total of ten.

Yes, we call this the flood narrative, but it’s really a story about God and Noah. Yet through it all Noah never says a word; he simply acts in obedience to God. He is saved by God’s grace, and life is saved with him. He is the primary beneficiary of God’s covenant, but all life is a beneficiary with him.

Why is this first covenant so important? It is important because it guarantees that there will be a middle to the story. It doesn’t specify what the middle will be, still less what the end will be. But it guarantees that there will be a stage on which the middle can be played out. Twice God specifies the time horizon of this covenant: it is “a covenant for all generations to come” (9:12), and it is “the eternal covenant” (9:16). Both expressions use the Hebrew word *olam*, meaning time that’s on the distant horizon, whether distant past or distant future. This covenant ensures that the middle will continue until the end is reached.

The broad outline of the story that plays out in this middle is given by a series of other covenants made by God. There are four of these further covenants.

The first is God’s covenant with Abraham. He promised to bless him by giving him a seed and a land (Gen 12:2, 7), and then solemnized this promise with a covenant enacted in two stages (chapters 15, 17). In the first Abraham was an inactive partner, put into a deep sleep by God. In the second he was given a role: circumcision, which would be the sign of the covenant. At the heart of the covenant lay a promise to be Abraham’s God:

“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” (17:7)

The second covenant is God’s covenant with Israel. After delivering them from slavery in Egypt, the Lord brought the Israelites to Mount Sinai to meet with him. Here he declared his purpose:

“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exod 19:4-6)

After giving them his commandments, the Book of the Covenant, God entered into covenant with Israel, a covenant sealed by blood (Exod 24:1-8). Israel had a role in this covenant: obedience to God’s commands. Moses read them the book of the covenant, and the people agreed, “Everything the Lord has said we will do” (Exod 24:3). But at the heart of this covenant lay a promise very similar to the one God made to Abraham: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” This covenant goes by various names. Because it was enacted through Moses it is called the Mosaic covenant; because it was enacted at Sinai it is called the Sinaitic covenant. It, too, had a sign: the Sabbath (Exod 31:17).

The third covenant was God’s covenant with David, promising him a son to be king after him.

“I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son.” (2 Sam 7:12-14)

There is a coherence to these covenants. God would take a people for himself: he would be their God, they would be his people, and he would dwell with them. He would provide them with a king who would lead them in righteousness and justice, and who would build a temple for his dwelling place.

In all three of these covenants, God bound himself to a course of action. But Israel repeatedly broke covenant, ending up expelled from the land God had promised and given. David’s descendants did not do what was right, as David had done, so God removed them and dissolved the kingdom. Nevertheless, over all of these acts of covenant infidelity arched the rainbow of God’s covenant fidelity. Israel hung on to the Lord’s covenant fidelity. It adopted as a confession this statement which began and ended our call to worship (Ps 118:1-4, 28-29): “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.” “Love” here is *hesed*, love that is loyal to covenant. This loyal love endures “forever,” to the *olam*, to the end of the story. Out of his loyal love, the Lord promised a new covenant:

**“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.” (Jer 31:33)**

The focal point of all these covenants is Christ Jesus. He is the son of Abraham, faithful Israel, the son of David, and the one in whose blood the new covenant is sealed, a covenant for the forgiveness of sins. Yet he is also the focal point of human rebellion against God, as Jew and Gentile conspired together to kill God’s son. Yet the rainbow arched even over the cross. Still God remembered his covenant with life. Still he kept his creation going. Rather than destroying the world in death, he destroyed death itself, raising his Son to new life. This Son, already firstborn over creation, he made firstborn from the dead, firstborn of a new creation. And he extends forgiveness to rebels, inviting them to follow Christ, entering into a new creation. This is the scandal of the cross, the gospel proclaimed by Peter and the other apostles: “You killed the author of life, but God raised him

from the dead. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out” (Acts 3:19).

In Christ, God incorporates us into his covenants. We become the children of Abraham. We are the people of God, not trying to follow a written law code, but with God’s spirit in us. And we live under the rule of Christ our king. In Christ, the end has already arrived in the middle. When we are in Christ, God places us into the life of the age to come; that’s what eternal life means.

What lies at the end of the story? The covenant and the sign endure until the *olam*, until the end, the age to come. What happens to the world when the end arrives? Our Scripture reading (Rom 8:18-30) stated that “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” What is its groaning? Is it groaning in hope of destruction? No! It has a twin hope: “the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.” And it has hope “that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” When the end comes, the earth is not destroyed. God cares for this world he has made, and he is faithful to it. Rather than being destroyed, this world is renewed and joined to heaven as “a new heaven and a new earth” in which God says, “It is done... Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children” (Rev 21:7).

When I designed our window, I specified a rainbow arching over all the panels. Above it are only the two symbols for God. Even the cross lies under the rainbow. But then Pat Haeger, the artist, executed my design in a wonderful way. She designed the rainbow to pour into the final panel, the new creation, with the new Jerusalem and the river of life. That’s a great expression of the faithfulness of God to his purposes expressed in his covenants.

Last December I attended the monthly meeting of our Visual Arts Fellowship. After sharing the Noah story and some of the ways in which it has been depicted in art over the centuries, I asked if anyone would like to try their own artistic rendering. Marilyn deKleer took up my challenge. She has combined several elements of the Biblical story in an insightful way. In the foreground is Noah’s altar, for it is the sacrifice offered on this altar that God graciously accepted to put him at rest, which led immediately to his promise to keep creation going. Over all arches the rainbow. Underneath, on a hill, stands the cross, with the rainbow arching over it. But the rainbow does double duty. Marilyn has made it also form a pearl which is one of the twelve gates into the New Jerusalem, the new creation. The rainbow not only keeps the middle going but forms the portal into the end.

God has a purpose for this world, for life, and most particularly for human life. He is loyally committed to life; he is determined that life triumph. It does not matter if that life chooses death. Still God’s purposes will triumph for he is faithful to his covenants. He has shown this through the Lord Jesus Christ, who lies at the heart of his covenant purposes. He has shown it by destroying death and raising his Son back to life. He has shown it by extending life to those who will enter into the new covenant, a covenant sealed with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, which God graciously accepts as putting himself at rest. Today we celebrate that God is a covenant-making and keeping God. And so we say, as did Israel:

**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.**

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