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“Keeping the Promise”

Genesis 9:12-16

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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."

Genesis 9:12-16

The days we most need to worship are the days when
"Worship as Commitment" / Promised Land

Last year was the hottest year on record. Since they started recording trends in 1850, the 10 warmest years have been the past 10 years. But we're not surprised that we're trending upward. We've believed our scientists for years. We're just not ark-builders.

Albert Einstein said, "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe."

Our city is already feeling the effects of global warming. Since 1900, the sea level in New York City has risen by about 12 inches. And by 2100, 76 years from now, sea levels here are expected to rise 5 more feet. Queens and Brooklyn will be the most impacted by the rising water. Parts of our coast land are already experiencing chronic tidal flooding. As global warming worsens, cloudbursts will happen more frequently, and we will have to wade through

sudden floods in our streets, sewers and subways. Since 2022, we're getting used to half of the stations in the MTA flooding during heavy rainstorms. Plus, in 60 years, we will start to endure five times as many heat waves. Right now, there are about 370 heat-related deaths each year, and Central Brooklyn has one of the highest heat vulnerability rates in the city. But air-conditioning is not really a solution—it contributes to the warming of our planet.

We need to get better at living with the symptoms of climate change, because humans are too addicted to the causes: fossil fuels, fast fashion, meat consumption, single-use plastics, deforestation, mountain-top removal, a disposable economy.

When we hear the stats, or see the doomsday clock getting closer to midnight, we feel doomed. Global catastrophe is around the corner, and we don't know what to do. Or, what we're doing is not enough? But is there anything we can do that would actually make a difference at this point?

Somebody should probably start building an ark because it seems like we're all going down. The promise God makes to Noah is ours too, but we have to get on board.

Humans were only ten generations old when Noah was born. He was the great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandchild of Adam. And while there weren't yet that many people on earth Noah is the only good one. God is frustrated with humans. They think evil things, and it breaks God's heart that God ever created them. So the plan is to wipe away every living thing from the earth. But then there's Noah.

No matter how violent the rest of humanity is, no matter how many trash islands they contribute to, or how many gallons of gas they use a week, or how many meadows they pour concrete over to make malls, Noah is good and reminds God how much God loves them. Noah trusts God enough to build an ark and bring on his family and animals and food enough for everyone.

So much water rushes up from the ground and pours down from the sky for 40 days, that the flood waters continue to cover the earth for 150 days. Everything is drowned, even the mountains.

When God remembers Noah on the boat in the middle of all that flood, God sends a wind to encourage the floods to recede. And when it's finally safe to open the door and let the animals out to thrive, Noah kisses the ground. And he cries, because despite how doomed it looked for a while, life still won. Noah can't believe God's mercy, so the first thing he does is make a sacrifice to God.

And it's Noah's faithfulness that inspires God's promise. When God smells the sacrifice, God knows that no matter what humans do, no matter how disappointed we may make God, no matter how violent we are toward each other and toward our earth, God will not curse the ground because of us.

"As long as the earth remains," God says, "there will be planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night."

When the coronavirus came to New York, the trees had just started blooming for spring. At first, I was frustrated that we were stuck inside right when the weather was calling us outside. But a month later,

after the daffodils had fallen and the street trees were filling out with leaves, watching nature continue on was comforting. Life was persistent. Creation is stubborn. But the comfort in knowing that the sun would continue to rise every morning paled next to the hopeful news of air and water quality increasing around the world, noise pollution decreasing on land and under the sea, density and diversity increasing in coral reefs. But humans' slowing and absence wasn't all good for our mother earth. In Sweden, eagle populations moved into an area where seabirds usually enjoyed protected breeding. Usually, eagles stayed away because bird watchers came to witness the yearly push toward life. But with humans gone, eagles flew over the cliffs and snatched the smaller birds. In Italy, without human movement, the invasive species cottontail rabbits enjoyed huge population growth, threatening native hares. And in the South Atlantic Ocean, the pandemic delayed a project to reduce the population of predatory mice that was threatening sea birds. In some ways, our earth got better because we stopped. But in other ways it missed the care and protection and attention humans provide.

Because of the lessons they learned from the year without constant human presence, some beaches are closing one or two days each week to give the land time to breathe—like a Sabbath. UNESCO recently threatened to put Venice on its endangered list, so large cruise ships are now banned from entering the city. But even better than that is how the Norwegian parliament is working to ban all cruise ships from their World Heritage fjords unless they are emission free. Plus, Norway is planning to cut all their domestic shipping emissions in half by 2030.

We've had the chance to see what's possible. We've seen the flood waters start to recede. With all we've done to this earth, it doesn't seem right that we or it should survive. But the earth needs us.

And God's mercy is so deep that God gives Noah a chance to start over. When they walk off the boat together, God tells them the same thing God told Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply." This earth is for joy and love. The first commandment is to thrive. But thriving is only possible when God and humans promise each other life.

"Never again," God says to Noah and his children. "I covenant with you and all living things, that floods will never destroy the earth again."

God points to the rainbow as the great symbol of God's love and promise to the whole earth. But the covenant is not a one-sided agreement.

Covenants are legally binding in the ancient Near East. They represent both an oath and a friendship. When God makes a covenant with Noah (or Abraham or Moses or David), God is acknowledging a commitment in relationship.

Actually, God isn't making a covenant with Noah here. God makes an eternal promise to the whole earth—to all living things—that God is in relationship with all of creation.

With this divine promise, we are called into relationship too. Not just with God, but with creation, and with God through creation. The more we connect ourselves to what happens to our trash when we throw it out, or where our food comes from, or the health of the trees on our block, the more we connect ourselves to God.

Switching to bamboo toilet paper means we're promising a future to elephants and tigers who live in the

Sumatran forests. Planting pollinator plants in our window boxes is a promise to local bees and the fresh veggies that will eventually fill food pantries. Converting our roofs to white roofs, if not green roofs, cuts down on the need for air conditioning and is a promise to each other and our whole planet to reduce our carbon footprint.

Noah and his family and all the animals come off the ark and God says, "Let's have fun." They already have all they need to thrive.

And now, when it looks really bad again, the solutions to heal our earth aren't complicated. We already have what we need to thrive too. We need to change how we produce energy, but more than anything, our earth can get better if we plant trees.

Wangari Maathai was the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. She founded the Green Belt Movement to plant trees across Kenya. Throughout her commitment to reforestation, she inspired others, including the United Nations, to plant more than 11 billion trees worldwide. And along the way, her work to heal the earth brought opportunities to alleviate poverty and end conflict.

If we are committed to this promise we have with God and creation, then our solution is in the earth. Trees remove carbon dioxide from our atmosphere. So they're an essential balance to human life. When 90% of copy and writing paper used is still made from virgin tree pulp, we need to start seeing every paper we use, not just the rainbow, as a keeping or a breaking of our promise with God. We can choose to spend a little more on recycled copy paper and slow deforestation. We can donate to organizations to plant trees every time we fly. And we can

request that the city plant a free street tree outside our home, or on an empty stretch of sidewalk. This year New York will plant close to 10,000 trees along our streets.

Investing in God's love means planting life back in the earth. Our life and thriving depends on our covenantal relationship with God and the rest of creation. We love every tree, every seed, every bird. We love the rivers and the mountains because they love us and because God loves them too. We aren't ourselves without the sunrises and sunsets, without babies and death and resurrection. We love living on this earth. May our earth and our God not doubt our love.

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