

## **The Message of the Cross Carries Consequences**

Genesis 9:8-17

First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Pen Peery

March 8, 2015

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

<sup>9</sup>As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.'

<sup>12</sup>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: <sup>13</sup>I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

<sup>14</sup>When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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.'

<sup>17</sup>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.'

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Today we will commission 36 seniors in high school for what God has in store for them next: college, employment, a gap year, or something to be determined. For many of them, your connection to their journey started at that baptismal font...when you made promises to these seniors and their parents that you would be church for them and help remind them of the promises that God has made with us all.

If you want a preview of what the world is going to look like – spend more of your time interacting with teenagers and reading about the way they understand the world. Today's

teenagers – starting with these seniors in high school – are a part of a generation called the “Plurals.” If you are just now learning about what impact the Millennials are having on the world...catch up. Millennials are sooooo 2011.

The Plurals – those who are born after 1997 – are the first generation in our country who will live in a culture where there is no majority race. Our teenagers are much more likely – not just to appreciate diversity – but to actually have friends who are diverse. Quite simply, they practice what the rest of us preach when it comes to reaching out to a world that is rich with difference and cultural distinction. The teenagers that I know – in this church and elsewhere – give me a lot of hope when I think about the future.

Each generation builds on the successes and failures of their parents. When it comes to embracing a world of difference and finding a way forward in peace, I think we are building with strength upon strength.

When it comes to faith formation and building up the church, I think we have some work to do.

A few years ago, a professor of youth ministry at Princeton Seminary named Kenda Creasy Dean wrote a book called *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. To be clear, this book was not written to be a critique of today’s teenagers. The critique is leveled at the adults who have the responsibility for raising children in the faith.

Using the extensive research and interviews of a sociologist named Christian Smith, Dean observes that the basic “creed” of American teenagers – what they believe about God – goes something like this:

- God exists who created the world and watches over the earth.
- God wants people to be good and nice – as it taught in most of the world’s major religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need him to solve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

On the face of it, that might sound like a pretty decent list. Certainly, there is something about it that smacks of what we call “faith.”

But think about what is missing. Where is the part about loving God with our whole heart? Where is the call to serve? Where is there an awareness of God’s self-giving in the person of Jesus? Where is the mystery? Where is the relationship? The connectedness to other believers? Where is the church?

Dean names this basic teenage creed as “Moral Therapeutic Deism.” Teenagers who fit the Moral Therapeutic Deism mold may view religion as a nice thing, even beneficial to their lives...but that kind of faith does not ask much of them, nor even concern them greatly. In

fact, Dean says, for most American teenagers, faith wields very little influence in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Dean, of course, does not paint all American teenagers with the same broad brush. There are exceptions – those teenagers for whom faith is an extremely important part of their lives and who can articulate a much more dynamic understanding of what it is that they believe. But research is research – and what she holds up to the Church in her book is a sobering reflection...not of our teenagers...but of what has been happening for the past few decades in our pews, and our Sunday school classrooms, and – most importantly – in the primary place where Christian formation takes root...in our homes.

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Okay preacher – so what does any of this have to do with Noah’s ark?

What we heard this morning is a story about God’s covenant with us – about God’s promise to us. Scripture is full of promises like these. God makes multiple covenants with God’s people – not because these covenants have an expiration date, but because God’s people have this nagging habit of veering off the track and needing God to affirm, yet again, the fact that God loves us.

Indeed, the scriptures are the story of what it means to be God’s people. The Bible is made up of 66 different books, but the theme through them all is this: God is faithful. God’s promises can be trusted. God’s love reigns supreme.

As a Christian, we know that love most perfectly in Jesus Christ – whose life, death and resurrection create for us a covenant of grace that can never be breached.

And that – we say – is the good news.

As Presbyterians, we are conditioned to talk about our faith in terms of being a grateful response to this news. Whether it is through worship, outreach, caring for one another, reaching out in love, offering hospitality, working for justice, feeding our minds, or teaching our children about the stories of scripture – we practice our faith...not as a down-payment on our insurance policy for our salvation, or to make us a better person, but because we are grateful for the good news of the gospel.

So what happens when we forget just how good that news is?

Kenda Creasy Dean would argue that our teenagers – who, again, learned most of what they know of the faith by watching us – are the canaries in the coal mine who let us know that this is exactly what is happening. We are at risk of losing an appreciation for the gospel. At risk of losing the handle on what it means to be saved. At risk of forgetting what the world and our lives would be like if we were not saved.

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<sup>1</sup> From my reading of Dean’s book.

When it comes to the good news of the gospel, I know that for us, for our church, we are quick to describe our faith in terms of grace. And I love that! Sometimes it seems that congregation like ours are but a drop in an ocean of other kinds of churches that seem preoccupied – not with grace, but with judgment. Like you, I think that grace is always the first word that should describe God and a community shaped around the gospel.

But you can't have grace without the presence of judgment. Grace might get the first and last word, but it is only needed because judgment is close at hand.

This is where the story of Noah comes in.

When we hear or tell the story of Noah's ark, we are usually quick to gloss over the details. We remember that God told Noah to build the ark. We remember that the animals came on by twosies, twosies. We remember that that Noah sent out the dove to search for dry land. And we remember that God marked God's promise to Noah (and us) with the sign of the rainbow.

What we often neglect to remember is that Noah's ark is a story of a cataclysmic disaster that all but destroyed the world. And what we often neglect to remember is that this flood was no accident; that it was the result of the sinfulness and corruption of the human race.

We often neglect to remember that – while the story about Noah's ark is ultimately about salvation...and grace...it is also a story of judgment.

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It's dangerous, isn't it, to read God's judgment back into history. To think about our own lives – those difficult chapters – and to wonder how God's judgment is factored in.

You don't have to go far to find plenty of preachers and churches who enjoy connecting those dots for us...plenty of preachers and churches that are quick to assume the responsibility of God and dole out judgment that – if you have noticed – usually lands on those with whom they disagree.

But before we cede ground to those preachers and those churches, we would be wise to first consider how the Bible describes judgment. Almost never does the judgment of God look like an angry man in the clouds (or a pulpit) smiting the unrighteous sinners. Rather, as in the story of Noah's ark, judgment is what happens when we assume the responsibility for our own choices.

In fact, the Hebrew word for corruption and destruction are one in the same.

According to Scripture, the flood that gave Noah cause to build his ark was a result, not of God's action, but of humanity's action. Destruction happened because the world was corrupt. The seeds of destruction were not sown by God, but by us.

God's action was not to cause judgment; God simply allowed for it to happen. Rather, God's action was to – carefully, intentionally, lovingly – ensure that every bit of the creation – humans and every kind of animal – would be saved from the destruction of the flood. And God's action was to make a covenant with us that – in spite of our bad choices – such destruction would never happen again.

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I think about our world –

In conflict and at war over who has access to resources  
Groaning under the weight of our population and our pollution  
Polarized by religious fundamentalists who refuse to coexist...

I think about our city –

Where our schools represent the kind of segregation and inequality that remind us  
of our past instead of our future...

I think about our denomination –

That continues to fight about who believes the right way while the gospel witness of  
our ministry together suffers...

And I am reminded that the turmoil we feel is no accident.  
It is judgment.

The judgment that is a consequence of our own corruption and  
our own choices.

And then I am reminded that in spite of it all – this judgment is not the last word. I am reminded that the God who stood at the beginning of time stands at its end. I am reminded that we are – each one us – claimed by the covenant of grace.

And we are called to live by that grace – to appreciate it – to be shaped and formed and challenged by it...so that our response to the good news might lead us beyond the dead-end results of our choices; beyond the judgments that we have rendered.

Because the best news of the gospel – indeed, what it means to follow in the steps of Jesus who trusted God enough to take his place on the cross – is that there is always hope, not just in that sweet bye and bye, but there is always hope in this world...the world that Christ came to save. The good news of the gospel is that there is always possibility. The good news of the gospel is that, even though it might cost us something – our pride, our ego, our giving up self-interest, and maybe even our life – there is – ultimately – triumph over the sin that led us to make poor choices.

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Here's the thing: God asks that we take these promises that have been made – these covenants that have been forged – God asks that we take these promises seriously enough that our faith might be more than an afterthought.

That instead, our faith might be the most consequential part of who we are and of how we choose to live.

Which begs the question: is it?