

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on October 17, 2021.

THE FIRST COVENANT

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you." Genesis 9:8-9

Today we move to one of the most colorful of our core stories. It is one of the fun stories that is taught in Sunday Schools and Vacation Bible Schools. There have been many Vacation Bible Schools that built big arcs that filled Sanctuaries. It is a lot of fun to picture the animals two by two entering the ark. There are many lessons we can learn from this story, but today I would have us focus on a concept that is introduced in this narrative.

In our series so far, we have been introduced to the first person, the first community and the first sin. Today we focus on the first covenant that God made with Noah and all humanity.

In my first year as pastor of this church, Campus Crusade spent a boat load of money on a marketing program designed to spread the Gospel. The slogan which was developed by a high-priced marketing firm consisted of three simple three word, "I Found It." Campus Crusade spent millions of dollars spreading this slogan across our country.

It seemed to me that for several years I could not get away from these three little words. I would come to a stoplight and the car in front of me would have a bumper sticker that read, "I found it." I would get on an elevator in Buffalo General Hospital and the woman standing next to me would have a button on her jacket that declared, "I Found It." There was one time we were returning from vacation driving through a rural part of Pennsylvania and there in giant letters on a bill board were posted the simple words, "I Found It.

It seemed that for a number of months this slogan was so ubiquitous that people began to respond. I recall driving up behind a car on the I-290 that had a sticker on its bumper that read, "I Never Lost It."

While the marketing company earned its fee by raising the profile of their evangelical client and causing a discussion about faith, I believe this slogan was and is a perversion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am not saying the sponsoring group was insincere. This group truly desired to share the Gospel with the world. I would guess they believed that this phrase captured the excitement that people often feel when they first come to faith. Yet these words are a perversion of the Gospel because it turns the whole message of the Bible upside down.

The phrase "I Found It" portrays the Christian faith as being all about the human attempt to discover God. It intimates that the Bible reveals the human struggle to find God. This is completely twisted around. The Good News of the Gospel is not that we find God but rather that God finds us. Our text for this morning reminds us that our faith celebrates God's search for us, not our quest for God.

Our passage for this morning comes from the latter part of the story of Noah that we find in Genesis. Many people are familiar with the early part of the story of Noah. God warns Noah that a flood will be coming and instructs him to build an Ark. Noah does as God commands and is prepared when the great rain begins. Noah loaded his family and all the animals two by two in the ark. The deluge comes and they are able to survive.

After the waters have subsided Noah and his family exit the ark to begin life anew. We then find God making the first of several covenants that God will make with human beings. We find covenants throughout the Scriptures and they all have one thing in common. It is God who initiates the Covenant. We read **Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you.**

It was God who came to Noah to offer the covenant.

It was God who came to Abraham and says he will found a people.

It was God who came to Moses on Sinai with the Commandments.

It is God who comes to us in Jesus to offer us his love.

In this first Covenant we learn several truths. First, we learn that we do not find God, God finds us. It was God who came to Noah to make the Covenant that he would never again destroy the world by water and gave the rainbow as a sign of the promise. God took the initiative even before we are born. We are told in the New Testament that Christ was slain before the foundation of the world. What this means for you and me is that even before we were born, God had a plan for us.

In a very real sense parents love their children even before they are born. Parents do things for their children before they make their entrance into the world. When they learn they are pregnant many women change their behaviors. They may eat better foods and abstain from drinking alcohol. Many smokers decide now is the time to quit. They take these actions to insure the best possible health for their unborn child.

All kinds of preparations are made to be ready for the new person. Rooms are cleaned and redecorated. Cribs and a host of other items are purchased. All things are made ready for the new little person to arrive. The new parents in a myriad of ways demonstrate their love for this child even before their birth.

In the same way, God had shown his love for each one of us. Before we were a gleam in our parents' eyes, God created the world for us. He had already given his Son to lead the way to eternal life. Jesus had already paid the price to show God's love, long before we could know of that love. God's love moves towards us.

In light of this how can we dare say, "I Found It", for clearly it is God who has been seeking us.

A second truth that we learn from this covenant in Genesis is that the agreement made with Noah is for all people. It is made with Noah and his family and all who come after him. This includes you and me and all people.

One continuing problem God has encountered with human beings is their attempt to put their group above others. God called his people Israel for a special purpose. They were chosen in order to be a blessing to the nations. Instead of seeing themselves as instruments of God, they often acted as if they deserved God's special favor. In effect they often would say, "We found it, God loves us more than you."

The same attitude handicapped the early church. The first followers of Jesus were all the same. They were all Jews. They believed that they were part of God's chosen. When they initially became witnesses for the Gospel, they shared the good news only with fellow Jews. It took the vision of Paul and others to understand that the love shown by Jesus in his death and resurrection was for all people. The love of Christ was for Greek and Roman, slave and free, Jew and Gentile.

In our present circumstances we need to be reminded that God's covenant is for all people. We are living in a time of increased division. Our world and nation seem to have become ever more divided by race, religion, nationalism, ideologies and class. We tend to value our tribe over others. The story of Noah reminds us that God's love is offered to all not just our group whatever that might be.

Christians say God found me, because we know that God loves each and every person.

All of what I have said is true. Yet I still do not think that we have gotten to the heart of the reason that most of us find it easier to say "I Found It" and hard to say "God Found Me." You and I can believe that human beings seek God. We know people who we might call seekers who tried all kinds of ways to find truth. We know ourselves that at times we have wanted to know God. We can accept that human beings might want to love God. We can believe God loves our group or tribe.

What is difficult for us to fathom is that God might actually love us as an individual. We can find it difficult to really believe that God would want to be in relationship with us. We know all too well our limitations, faults and failings. We wonder how could the creator of heaven and earth really care about me?

The poet George Herbert portrayed this dilemma in a poem which is a dialogue between a human being and God in these words:

**Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.**

**"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";
Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee."**

**Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"**

**"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.**

Though we can scarcely believe it – God loves us and desires to be in relationship with us.

What then is required of us? The most basic and fundamental response of a Christian is thanksgiving. After being rescued from the flood and exiting the ark, we learn that one of the first things that Noah did was build an altar and worship God. God has come to us in Jesus and our only proper response is thanksgiving.

Now it is all well and good to say that we should respond with thanksgiving, yet how are we to begin to show that gratitude. The place to begin is in prayer and worship. A central part of our prayer life should focus on thanksgiving. All too often, at least in my life, prayer seems to be mostly focused on making requests to God. We ask God to heal this person or fix some difficult situation. We ask our Lord to give us direction when faced with a difficult decision. We can often spend so much time putting in our standing orders to God that we overlook saying thank you.

There is so much for us to be thankful for. So, when you pray each day, begin with thanksgiving. Share with God all the good things he has given you that day. Thank God for the experiences that you enjoyed, thank God for his love.

The heart of our experience of corporate worship should be thanksgiving. Throughout Christian history the Lord's Supper has been at the heart of Christian worship. One of the ancient names for communion comes from a time all Christians spoke Greek. They called communion the Eucharist. Eucharist comes from a root that means to give thanks.

Thus, the core of Christian worship is to be a corporate experience of giving thanks to God for all he has done in Jesus Christ. We are reminded in the Eucharist that Christ's body was broken for us. In worship we come to give thanks to God for all he has done for us. May we offer ourselves, just as we are with all our faults and weaknesses to the God who loved us even before we came into being.

The story of the First Covenant with Noah reminds us of some very basic truths. God's love is meant for all people. You and I do not possess the love of God, but rather we are possessed by it. We do not earn his love, but give thanks for his grace.

We are not to say "I Found It," but rather "God Found Me."