

Gen. 9:8–17

Ps. 25:1–10

1 Pet. 3:18–22

Mark 1:9–15

Never Again!

Goal for the Session Adults will explore the implications of God's everlasting covenant with every living creature and all generations.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Genesis 9:8–17

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Dianne Bergant

Several important aspects of this covenant should be noted. First, it was made with all of creation. Second, it was multigenerational, made not only with Noah and those present, but with all who would come in the future as well. The biblical flood narrative contains a story of deliverance and of relationship with God. God directed Noah, the only one who found favor with the Lord, to build an ark so that he and his family and some of the animals might escape the punishing waters of the flood. From this small community God then fashioned a new human family and established a covenant with that family and with the world as a whole. This is a story of deliverance and new beginnings.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Wm. Loyd Allen

The God revealed here is adaptable, touched to the heart by creation, and willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive. The God of this covenant is unchanging only in refusing to give up on creation. God keeps the future open by self-limitation when humanity threatens to close off hope by unlimited repeat offenses. God takes this risk because God's heart is touched by creation's suffering. The God declaring this covenant is not an objective judge meting out a just sentence, but a lover grieved to the heart at the beloved's violence, yet still seeking reconciliation. Readers will find divine regret throughout this covenant, but will look in vain for anger.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Jane Anne Ferguson

The creatures made in God's image may always resist God. Yet God lays down God's weapons against creation, against humankind. God puts the undrawn bow in the clouds as a personal reminder “never again” to destroy creation with a flood. In the light of that bow, the rainbow, humanity can see God as “One Who Remembers,” even in the midst of chaos, even in the midst of rebellion by creation and its creatures.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” David J. Lose

The self-limitation and willingness to sacrifice divine freedom that this passage describes reach their climax in the passion of Jesus Christ, for which Lent prepares us. This passage invites us to reconsider our relationships with each other and, indeed, all creation. If God, who alone has the right to despair, judge, or destroy, surrenders the divine prerogative from covenantal commitment, might not we who have tasted this mercy look upon all persons and all things as inherently worthwhile, that is, as those things that God has called worthy?

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Genesis 9:8–17

Focus on Your Teaching

Recent years have seen unprecedented disasters due to flooding. Tsunamis, the overflowing of rivers, and the rising of sea levels have destroyed the lives and livelihood of millions. These disasters cause many adults to bring deeper questions to the story of Noah and the Flood than how all the animals could fit in the ark. Encourage your group to embrace these questions as they read and study the story today.

Lord, speak anew to me through this old story, that I might know you more deeply and help others to do the same. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles (including several study Bibles)
 - purple cloth
 - cross
 - six votive candles, matches
 - board or newsprint
 - markers, pens
 - copies of Resource Sheets 1, 2
 - copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session
- For Responding
- option 1: board or newsprint and markers
 - option 2: guest speaker on disaster response efforts
 - option 3: information on climate change and species extinction

GATHERING

Before the session, if you will be using option 2 in Responding, invite as a guest speaker someone who has survived a natural disaster or who works in disaster response efforts. Inform your guest of the content of today's session. Invite your guest to talk about how he or she has seen God at work in the midst of disaster to bring healing and hope, and how the church can be a sign of God's presence in such times. If you will be using option 3 in Responding, bring information on climate change or care of creation from your denomination's Web site.

Greet participants by name as they arrive. Invite them to help you arrange the purple fabric in the center of your learning space and place the cross and votive candles on it.

Draw attention to the worship space you have created. Explain that as this is the first Sunday in Lent, you will light one of the votive candles. As you light the candle, ask adults to reflect on this question: What words or images do you associate with the word *covenant*?

Allow a few moments for silent reflection. Invite those comfortable doing so to offer a word, phrase, or image that comes to mind. Tell the group that you will explore in today's biblical story the first covenant God makes.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing, then extinguish the candle:

God of all creation, your love and mercy are deeper and wider than we often imagine. Open our hearts to know the love that flows from your heart toward all that you have created. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

EXPLORING

Form two groups and read aloud Genesis 9:8–17, alternating verses between groups. Ask learners what words and phrases they heard repeated multiple times in this passage (e.g., *covenant, every living creature, all flesh, never again*). Write these on a board or newsprint.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Genesis 9:8–17). Ask a volunteer to read the “What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Invite the group to discuss:

- ✧ Often we think of “covenant” in terms of God’s relationship with God’s chosen people. How does today’s story broaden our understanding of the word *covenant*?

Invite learners to recall the lesson earlier in the quarter on Genesis 1. Ask:

- ✧ What do the waters of Genesis 1 and the waters in the flood story symbolize?
- ✧ What does the “bow” God sets in the sky symbolize?

Ask the group to look at notes in a study Bible. If they have trouble finding the information, explain that the bow likely refers to the archery bow of the divine warrior. Hanging the bow in the sky is a sign that the war is over and chaos has ended. The bow is to serve as a reminder of the covenant to whom? (See Genesis 9:14–16.)

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Unilateral Covenant) and pens. Invite learners to form small groups and work on Resource Sheet 2. (They will also need Resource Sheet 1.) Allow about ten minutes for this exercise.

Gather the whole group again and invite participants to compare insights from their small-group discussions. Note that, like the first creation account in Genesis, this text likely comes from the time of the Babylonian exile. Invite the group to discuss the following:

- ✧ How might this story have brought comfort and hope to a people in exile?
- ✧ How might it bring comfort and hope to those experiencing chaos or disaster today?

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Journey to the Cross** Read the following quote:

To see and know God as the “One Who Remembers” us, corporately and individually, with love and forgiveness in the midst of life’s chaos with all its pain and suffering, is to discover redemption. Hearing this story on the First Sunday in Lent we begin our walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem, understanding in a deeper, fuller way the God who sent him and whom he served.

—Excerpted from Jane Anne Ferguson, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 28.

Then ask a volunteer to read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Then invite the group to discuss:

- ✧ How do both authors connect Genesis 9 with the beginning of Lent?

Say: “During the season of Lent, we follow Jesus to the cross, where God’s self-limiting, self-giving love finds its ultimate expression. The Lenten season calls us to repent of our resistance to God and remember our creaturely limits. Knowing our utter dependence on God’s mercy, we seek to show the same mercy to others, to love others with the same self-limiting and self-giving love.”

For option 2, as an alternative to a guest speaker, bring information about Camp Noah, a program for children who have experienced natural disasters: www.lssmn.org/camp_noah.

Invite participants to offer ideas for practices of self-limiting and self-giving love. Write these on the board or newsprint. Encourage each person to commit to at least one of these practices for this Lenten season.

- 2. Disaster Response** When natural disasters strike, the church can provide a very tangible sign of God's covenant with all people and all creation. Through disaster relief efforts, God's people communicate to victims that they are not alone and that God has not abandoned them.

Introduce the guest speaker and tell the class that the guest will talk about how he or she has seen God at work in the midst of disaster to bring healing and hope. Agree with the speaker about how much time is available to speak in order to allow time for a brief discussion. He or she should also mention any volunteer opportunities.

After a brief discussion time following the guest's presentation, conclude with this question:

- ✿ What are ways this group or our community can better help victims of disaster and give them hope?

- 3. All Living Creatures** The focus text invites discussion about how people of faith might respond to issues of climate change and care for creation in light of God's covenant with all living creatures for all generations. Share information from your denomination. Invite adults to discuss individual and congregational responses to what is read.

CLOSING

Invite participants to tell how they would respond, in one or two sentences, if a family member or friend asked them what they learned today. If some have family members participating in this curriculum at different age levels, encourage them to talk together about what they are learning sometime during the coming week.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Gracious and merciful God, we thank you for your unfailing commitment to your whole creation, and for your unfailing commitment to us. Forgive our self-centered, short-sighted ways. Help us to value and care for your creation as you do, and to work toward its healing. We pray in the name of Jesus, through whom you took upon yourself the pain of creation, and through whom you promise to reconcile all things on earth and in heaven. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, or e-mail it to learners during the week. Encourage them to read the focus scripture and the resource sheet before the next session.

Focus on Genesis 9:8–17

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The Unilateral Covenant

Read the following excerpt:



This covenant also reveals the unity of all creation, the intractable sinfulness and undeserved blessedness of humanity, and all of creation's total dependence upon God's active compassion. Creation, including humanity, is one. What affects part affects all. The deep purpose of nature is diversity in unity under God's ownership. Yet humanity consistently fails to accept its given limits and attempts to take possession of life into its own hands, contaminating the cosmos with violence and fear. All creation suffers the consequences (9:2–6), but this is not the first or last word to Noah's kind. The first and last words are, "abound on the earth and multiply in it" (9:1, 7). In spite of all evidence to the contrary, humanity and creation are blessed, for God remains loyal to the disloyal. Humanity proves intractable in its sin, so God changes strategy. Since humanity does not end the downward spiral of violence, God covenants to do so. Humanity and the cosmos are ultimately dependent for survival upon a life force beyond creation, a God willing to initiate an intervention.

—Excerpted from Wm. Loyd Allen, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 28–30.

Respond to the statement "Creation, including humanity, is one. What affects part affects all." Where do we see evidence of this today?

Where do we see evidence that "humanity consistently fails to accept its given limits," and that "all creation suffers the consequences"?

Read again the last three sentences of the above excerpt. Note the words "God changes strategy." How might this be seen as leading ultimately to the cross?

Read the "Where?" and "So What?" excerpts on Resource Sheet 1.

What in the authors' comments do you find helpful for your understanding of the flood story and the covenant that follows?

How has your image of God changed or expanded in any way by reflecting on this text?