

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY WORSHIP, OCTOBER 27, 2024
SERMON: COVENANT AND CONTRACT
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Scripture Reading

Genesis 9:1-17

9 Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. 2 The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. 3 Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

4 “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. 5 And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.

6 “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.

7 As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.”

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: 9 “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you 10 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. 11 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.”

12 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: 13 I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, 15 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. 16 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.”

17 So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

Sermon: Covenant and Contract

This sermon is dedicated to the memories of Hoku the dog and Tom the cat, and all our furry friends that we have loved and lost.

I feel like churches don't cover Noah's Ark enough in Sunday Worship. This story seems to be delegated to Sunday school, because the children love the animals and the big boat and the rainbow. It's a memorable story for kids!

However, we adults love animals (and big boats and rainbows, for that matter), too. And scripture is clear that we're meant to be stewards over all the living things of the earth. In fact, the words used here in Genesis is that we are in covenant with God and all the living things of the earth; we have a duty to love and respect not only each other as humans, but all of our furry, scaly, and feathered friends, too.

For those of you unfamiliar with this word from scripture, "covenant," it's a religious word that means sacred agreement. Covenants are meant to be a method of respectful order through relationships. While covenants are usually somewhat flexible in order to meet the needs of evolving relationships over time, they're usually comprised of predetermined expectations of behavior between two or more parties and God to assure harmony and respect among the body of God's creatures. Covenants designate mutual responsibilities for the parties involved that keep them directed toward God and His rule over our lives and our world.

In the story of Noah's Ark, God floods the world and kills everyone but Noah's family and two pairs (or seven?) of every (clean?) animal*. The people were killed for being wicked and straying from God. The covenant set forward by God in the aftermath of the flood, which we read today, outlines the responsibilities moving forward that is meant to correct the sinfulness of previous generations. It's a blueprint for correct behavior so that a catastrophic event is not necessary again.

In this covenant, animals have the responsibility to help humans eat and farm. In return, humans have the responsibility to love and care for the animals and honor God through the established mindfulness that God created the beasts, too.

So does all this business about the covenant between God and the people and the animals mean that God wants us to have cuddly pets and dress them up in Halloween costumes and play ball with them at the district park? Well, no, not exactly. This contemporary concept of "pets" would have been very foreign to the early Hebrews of Genesis. The relationship outlined in Genesis is very transactional – take care of your living tools with love and respect.

But the thing about covenants is that they're different from legal contracts in a distinct way, in that relationships are the front and center of a covenant, whereas a legal contract is meant to simply uphold rules and protect decorum. Contracts are more binding, soulless, and methodical. Covenants are more nuanced and filled with space for the ambiguous parts of life like love, beauty, grief, and hope; or more precisely to the point of this message, covenants help under-stand the evolution from Biblical times until now of how we love our animal friends.

A couple years ago I gave a lecture at Boston University for a group of students that were

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preparing to go on a volunteer trip to Mexico to learn about the immigration system down there and visit asylum shelters along the border. As a Pastor, I focused my lecture on the concept of "covenant" against the concept of "contract". I highlighted that much of the way

our immigration services system in the United States functions is on a public-private contract, in which some of the immigration procedures and services are governmental, and some of them are private and mostly run by religious organizations, predominantly churches.

My Gen Z (people born between 1997-2010) audience at Boston University were very interest-ed in pursuing government careers in immigration, because they had a heart for those fleeing their countries in pursuit of a better life. The reason I explained the difference between “covenant” and “contract” to them is because the government primarily operates on a “contract,” whereas the private social organizations (again, predominantly churches) operate on a “covenant.” The example I provided about the difference is an observation of the aftermath of basically any natural disaster. Government entities, such as FEMA, contract to be in those places like flooded North Carolina or hurricane battered Florida for a distinct period of time, with a distinct set of objectives, with a distinct amount of operation funding. In contrast, private social organizations like UCC Disaster Ministries, Catholic Charities, or United Methodist Committee on Relief, exist in disaster affected areas long before an event strikes, as well as long afterward, and have more flexibility on what they can offer and how. These social organizations operate on a “covenant” with disaster-impacted communities that is relationship based and often more concerned with the long term impact of the community’s wellbeing than a boxed-in government agency or contract would be.

My point, in this lecture I provided, is that in killing off the church and other grassroots social organizations like it, we’re effectively handing over social services and relief to contract-based governmental organizations that were never designed to be long-term, holistic, or relational. Our country was founded with a balance of private, covenantal institutions in mind working together with the governmental, contract-based institutions. Now, as the private institutions die, so does the relational, loving, covenantal care that accompanies them in times of disaster or need. I urged them to expand their understanding of what social relief work means outside of government contract as they prepared for their trip to the Southern border.

So – you may be wondering, what does covenantal vs contractual social organization have to do with playing ball with my dog at the park?

The people who wrote down the account of Noah and the Ark and God’s subsequent covenant with humankind weren’t imagining that love and responsibility over the animals equated to having your domesticated kitty sit on your laptop purring while you’re in a Zoom meeting, or purchasing a professional photoshoot for your family that includes the dog. As I said, that level of love and responsibility over the animals would have been foreign to those folks so many years ago. Yet, a covenant is not a contract. It’s not a legalistic set of rules meant to overpower the nuance of love and relationship.

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A covenant is not just a legal agreement—it’s a relationship, and like all relationships, it grows and evolves over time. Just as our relationship with God deepens and changes, so too does our relationship with His creation, including our pets. The covenant God made with Noah wasn’t just about survival or rules—it was about connection, stewardship, and

love. God promised never to destroy the earth again, and this was a sign that He values all life—human, animal, and everything in between. He entrusted us to be stewards of His creation, participants in the ongoing care of the earth and all its creatures.

So yes, it's more than okay to love our fur babies deeply. They are part of the covenant God made with all creation. The love we show to them, the care we give, and the grief we feel

when they pass are all part of how we live out our role as stewards of God's creation.

When

we grieve the loss of a pet, we honor that covenant relationship, acknowledging the love and joy they brought into our lives. It's an extension of the same love God has for all His creatures.

We see it all around us today: people mourning the loss of their pets deeply, and that's not wrong or misplaced. I imagine the early Hebrew shepherds mourned the death of their sheepdogs, too. It's part of how we are wired to live in relationship with the world around us.

If God took the time to include the animals in His covenant with Noah, then surely our love and care for them is a reflection of the love God has for all His creation. The covenant in Noah's day is the same as it is now; but because it's a covenant and not a contract, it has the ability to reflect the way we demonstrate love in the 21st century even if it looks somewhat different than the way our ancestors reflected love 13,000 years ago.

So, let us give thanks for the animals in our lives, past and present. They teach us about loyalty, joy, and the unconditional love that mirrors God's own love for us. As we honor our pets, we honor the covenant we share with God, His creation, and all the living beings we are blessed to care for. Amen.

*Bible Nerd Note: Genesis is thought to be a compilation of 4 different written accounts from 4 different classes of priests (Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomist). Many of the stories in Genesis, including Noah's Ark, are repeated in different ways in adjacent chapters. In Genesis 6, God commands Noah to take "2 of every kind of animal that moves along the ground," and then the chapter is repeated in Genesis 7, in which God commands Noah to take "7 pairs of every kind of clean animal." Variations such as this, according to biblical scholars, is evidence that Genesis is a mashup of these 4 different interpretations of early Jewish priest classes. The reason they believe there were 4 classes of priests is there are 4 different writing styles in Hebrew that make up the repetitive verses of Genesis.