

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 9:8-17, 12:1-3, “Colors of the Covenant”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/6/2026

When was the last time you made a promise,
and you really meant it?

At the end of July my family went camping in British Columbia
with Sonja’s family. There were kids everywhere, adults coming and going,
lots of food and games – you know the scene.

At one point when I was trying to help my brother-in-law figure out
why his RV refrigerator wasn’t working
(and I know nothing about either RVs or refrigerators),
my 10 year old niece Poppy came up to me and asked
if I would play a card game called “Slap Jacks.”

Now Slap Jacks is a game where you each take turns flipping a card face up
onto a pile, and nothing happens unless the card is a Jack.
Then you try to slap your hand down as fast as possible
because whoever slaps the Jack first wins that round.

This is ... not a very stimulating game for people older than 10 years old,
which is why nobody else was playing the game at the time.
Fortunately, I had a good excuse to not play Slap Jacks
because I was helping Poppy’s father.

But then I made the mistake of looking into her forlorn puppy dog eyes
and my resolve melted.

I heard myself say the words, “I can’t right now, Poppy,
but I will play Slap Jacks with you later today, okay? I promise.”

When I said, “I promise,” a chill went through my spine because I realized
there is now no going back on this.
I must make time in my day for Slap Jacks.

Because saying, “I promise,” means something to me.
When I promise to do something for another person,
it’s more than stating a general intent.

“I promise” is much different than a “hopefully,” or “it’s a possibility.”

A promise commits me to following through
even if it costs me greatly to do so.

With that in mind, we can easily see the differences between
a promise, a prediction, and a goal.

A prediction says,

“It seems more likely than not that we will play Slap Jacks in the future.”

If the prediction doesn’t come about, there’s no fault to be laid
on the person who made the prediction –
it was just a statement of probability.

Weather forecasters make predictions.

And even though we get mad at them when they’re wrong,
that’s not logical because a prediction
does not commit one person to another relationally.

Then there’s goals. A goal setter says,

“I will try to play Slap Jacks with you sometime.”

That means there will be an effort made to bring this thing to pass,
but again, if it doesn’t happen, the goal setter says,
“I wanted to, but it didn’t work out!”

A goal is a statement of hopeful intent,

but still leaves a lot of room for other outcomes.

A promise says, “You can count on Slap Jacks being played

and through this promise, my credibility in our relationship is at stake.”

(Which means that yes, I did play Slap Jacks with Poppy.

And yes, I let her win, because otherwise the game was never going to end.)

We worship a God who promises.

God doesn’t run off of predictions or goals, but promises.

When God makes a promise and humanity responds by faith,
the result is known as a divine covenant.

A divine covenant is an enduring relational framework

in which God’s own credibility is at stake,

and to which humanity must respond by faith. [REPEAT]

Today's scripture readings include the covenant of God with creation in Genesis 9,
and the promises of God to Abraham in Genesis 12
that form the basis of God's covenant with Israel.

I preached on both of these passages last year
as part of a long series on Genesis 1-11 which involved a pretty detailed
interpretation of what's happening in this prologue,
how all that relates to other cultures and ancient stories
prevalent among ancient Israel's neighbors,
deep ethical and theological concerns raised, etc.
I'm not going to rehearse all of that right now because we just don't have the time.
If you're interested in those things,
the series is available on our YouTube channel
for you to review anytime.

In brief, while the creation stories move from chaos to order,
the flood story describes an event that moved the well-ordered world
into chaotic deconstruction, and then back again.
The flood of Noah story is ultimately about re-creation
with Noah and his family set in the place of Adam and Eve.
They are even given the same command by God
that Adam and Eve were given: Be fruitful and multiply.

But this time, God adds something new: a covenant.
Not only a covenant with Noah and his family,
but also with every living creature on the planet.

The promise of the covenant is this:
Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood;
never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.

It's a promise in which God's credibility and reputation are at stake.
The promise comes with the sign of the rainbow.

Notice that it doesn't say rainbows never existed before this.
Sometimes people will poke fun at this passage like it's an ancient version
of Rudyard Kipling's "just-so stories" like "how the leopard got its spots"
or "how the camel got his hump."

The story certainly functions to explain the rainbow's meaning for Israel
in a contrasting way to its meaning for other ancient cultures,

but it doesn't say the rainbow appeared for the first time after the flood.
But in v. 13 God says, "I have set my rainbow in the clouds."

This is something that has occurred in the past –
it's a known feature of the created world.

What's new is the rainbow's meaning:

"and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

I have set it there, which you have seen and marveled at your whole life.

But from this point forward it will be a sign of the covenant.

The colors of the rainbow are a reminder to God and a visual promise
held out before all of creation that God is with us and for us.

This is an important theological moment when it comes to understanding
what God is interested in.

The implication is that humanity's salvation is inextricably tied up
with everything else within creation.

The Ark was not just for humanity, and the rainbow covenant
is not merely a covenant with humanity.

To imagine that's God is interested in us and only us
is not Noah's perspective nor is it God's.

Christopher J.H. Wright expands on this:

"The ongoing history of the human race is based on the endurance
of this Noahic covenant. As all development agencies point out,
the hunger of many and the starvation of some
of the human race is not because of an overall shortage
of food in the earth ... God has kept his covenant.

It is *human* incompetence, greed, injustice and aggression
which deny the benefits of it to so many."

He wrote that in 1992. With 34 more years of seeing the impacts of climate change,
we could add that human activity is also bringing chaos once again
to the rest of creation which is loved and well ordered by God.

Even so, God's rainbow promise remains,
which means at some basic level, God is still in committed relationship
with everyone and everything on earth.

Now we come to the promises of Genesis 12:1-3.

While God's commitment to sustain creation is universal,
the way of restoring relationship with humanity

is very particular.
God chooses Abram: an ordinary man from an ordinary family.
Yahweh simply chooses him.

And this choice was not based on being voted
most likely to found a religion by his classmates.

If anything, Abram's *lack* of accomplishments distinguish him for this honor:
75 years old, no children, and he leaves his family's homeland
where all of his connections and support systems are.

Whatever happens in this guy's life reveals the work of God,
because apart from God's intervention, Abram has very little to stand on,
no legacy to speak of, no hope of being remembered in posterity.

And so it is that God makes *promises* to Abram:
God will make Abram into a Great Nation and bless him.
God will also make his name great and he will be a blessing.
In fact, all families on earth will be blessed through him.

These promises are believed by Abram, later known as Abraham.
Abraham accepted the promises of God as trustworthy and true.
And though it took yet decades longer for Abraham and Sarah
to have a child together,
these promises became the backbone
of the enduring covenant between God and Israel,
not only for their sake, but for the sake
of all families on earth.

The Apostle Paul remarks in his letter to the Roman church,
"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Paul also wrote to the Corinthian church,
**"For no matter how many promises God has made,
they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him
the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God."**

God hasn't stopped living by promises. God's promises extend to us today.

When things fall apart in your life, in the world around,
it can feel like we're adrift at sea with no help in sight.

But even then, God's promises are extended to us and offer us hope.

God's promises endure, but how they are experienced, how people respond to them
and what they mean are always questions that require
us to creatively and courageously respond by faith in our own time.

And so through September and October, we will explore the colors of the covenant
God made with Abraham
as it is traced from Genesis, to Exodus, to Joshua,
and finally in 2 Samuel.