

## Wilderness Covenant

Genesis 9:8-15; Mark 1:9-15

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It's not perfect news, but it is good news.

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April 20, 1999. Do you remember it? I do. Almost every second. I read all of the reports. All of the timelines. I even watched that horrible video of them. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Littleton, Colorado. Columbine High School. Twelve students, one teacher: thirteen murdered. Do you know that Columbine is now the 13<sup>th</sup> deadliest U.S. shooting in modern history? 13<sup>th</sup>. San Bernardino. Sutherland Springs. Sandy Hook. Virginia Tech. Orlando. Las Vegas. Parkland, Florida. All deadlier. All post-Columbine. 4 of the top-10 in just the last 20 months.

I remember being at my friend's house. Watching the news in shock and disbelief. This can't be. This is a simulation. But it wasn't, it was real. Later we saw the closed-circuit feed. We watched Eric swing his rifle around in that hallway, without a care, without remorse like he was just twirling a baton at band practice. We then read how they asked that girl, at gun point, if she believed in God. We read that she confessed. And then we read that they shot her.

It was too much. The world stopped. Time stopped. Never before were kids attacked in this kind of way. It felt like weeks or months before any of us returned to "normalcy." Tom Brokaw brought his NBC news crew to our high school. Apparently Westfield Senior High was a close demographic sibling to Columbine. He wanted to address the school, our class, and investigate if there were underlining issues that we shared in common. How many classified themselves as "loners." How prevalent was bullying? Were there any cliques, dark cliques, like this supposed Trench Coat Mafia?

I remember sitting on the risers thinking, for the first real time, that I was no longer sure of the meaning of God's Covenant. Of God's promise. For how could this be, how could this have happened under God's watch? Yes, I was aware of our world's darkest history, but I was a teenager, and at that time, Columbine was the greatest horror I could ever imagine. And it made no sense. There was no reason. There was no good reason. And it was on those risers that it first became clear to me that no, everything does not happen for a reason. Impossible. For if it did... for if God ordains for kids to be slaughtered for some higher or latent purpose, then that God would be monstrous and dead to me.

And so I came to believe that God is not the author of destruction. God is not the cause of our suffering. God takes no delight and earns no glory from our pain. For our story in Genesis is clear. God, long ago, hung up God's bow. God promises Noah to never again destroy God's people. God covenants to never again destroy any flesh. It's a sad translation that most of our modern Bibles describe the sign of God's covenant as a "rainbow" in the sky. For, the Hebrew **חֶשֶׁבֶת** (*qeshet*) almost always refers to a warrior's bow. Taken in this way, God is not just offering us a flag of truce, but God is reconstituting the very symbol of war into a symbol of peace. Not unlike how later the cross will be refashioned as a signpost towards life as opposed to a reminder of an instrument of death.

And yet, just because God wishes to reform creation towards those ends, we must yet come to terms with the kingdom being already, being near, but also not yet. For God's covenant is not perfect, as we might understand perfection. For God's covenant, at least here with Noah and at present with us, does not guarantee our protection, our blessing, our prosperity. God's love and favor does not remove from us our pain, shame, and humiliation. For life will still happen. Nature and chaos and mutations will still have their way, and sometimes our lives will sum up to being nothing more than collateral damage.

Take Noah for instance. The guy just survived a cataclysmic event. He did the unthinkable and saved all flesh from certain and complete annihilation. And though he receives God's covenant, he yet, just verses later, is found out by his sons to be the world's first naked drunkard. Perhaps justified after the ordeal he just went through, Noah downs a bit too much of the red fermented grape and finds himself ass up in the wind. Talk about humiliation and shame! But worse,

due to some strange law, one of Noah's sons (Canaan) after seeing him lying there naked, will have his entire lineage cursed until the end of his days!

God's covenant then does not come with a guaranteed no-harm warranty. For brother will rise up against brother. Birthrights will be stolen. Plagues and famines will siege the land. And even the blameless will lose all. Temples will be destroyed. Yes, temples will be rebuilt. But, temples will be destroyed again. Then there will be Exiles. Laments. And the desolating sacrilege. Persecutions. Imprisonments. The Holocaust. God's covenant is not protection. It is not perfection. It is not prosperity.

For even God's own son will be baptized only to immediately be thrown out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. There, Satan will tempt him. Wild beasts will surround him. He will emerge to find his mentor arrested. Later, his own disciples will not understand him. One even will choose to betray him. The people will then free a common thief over him. And he will suffer. Alone. And die. And, in Mark's Gospel at least, none will stick around to see him resurrect to life.

No, God's covenant does not render even the best of us safe. We can go from dropping off our kids at school, to turning on the TV in horror just hours later. We can go from feeling happy in our marriage to learning that our spouse has been unfaithful. We can go from being healthy and energetic and full of life to crumbling to our knees in the doctor's office at a diagnosis. There is and will be hunger. There is and will be homelessness. There is and will be abuse. Drugs. Alcohol. Violence. Depression. Loneliness. Alienation. And none of it, I see, is for a greater reason. No, all of that is cruel. Chaotic. And unfair. My friends, you don't need me to say any of this, for we all know it: the wilderness is all too real, and we are surrounded by a great many wild beasts, with many faces, with many names. And there is no cure-all remedy that can, at least at present, fully redeem the fallen state of our timeline.

So what then is the purpose of God's covenant? If it's not the blessing of safety or prosperity, what is it? I have come to believe it is the promise of presence. The promise of a relationship. The promise of love and hope. Now I know, this is not perfect news. But it is good news. For God's bow is up in the sky, and God's tears are down on the ground. God is there with us in the wilderness. Grieving, comforting, even healing, though maybe short of curing. After all, God knows this wilderness. God is from the wilderness. This wilderness is God's original home. "Several texts imply that the Lord is uniquely in, and originates from, the wilderness south of Palestine. The Lord first appears to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, and there reveals the divine name."<sup>1</sup> The prophets pave the way for the Lord in the wilderness. And it is there, in that setting that the son of God is baptized, and from which begins his ministry.

God is not then the Summoner of the beasts, but our friend amongst them. As God's son wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus, God too weeps for us. God weeps for what is happening to this nation. God weeps for what has come of God's creation. For while there is admittedly so much beauty, there is also way, way too much ugly.

You know, candidly, I'm sometimes comforted by a wild idea. A fantastic notion. That we were a first creation, not the last, or even the ideal. But that in the grand experiment of perfecting creation throughout the cosmos, Earth was an initial, trial run. Maybe that's why it took some 4 billion years before we ever sprouted up? Maybe God just hadn't yet gotten the chemistry right. Too much time. Too much free will. Too many freedoms in the equations for nature and the formulas of evolution, yielding too many mutations of both body and spirit. And so perhaps, like the accomplished inventor who yet cherishes her very first childhood invention, who keeps it in near reach on her office shelf, even as it collects dust, perhaps Earth, and its solar system, is in the same vicinity to God. On the cosmic shelf. ...Honestly, it arrests my wonder and comforts me in a strange kind of way. For at the very least, it helps explain why evil has continued to run its course, leaving another 17 dead -- 16 children -- under the watch of a benevolent, albeit, perhaps, less than omniscient God.

And so, even if it's far-fetched, and completely heretical, still in that hypothetical scenario God cares. God weeps. God waits. And God hopes, that somehow, miraculously, that first creation will somehow figure it all out and encounter the

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 5.

peace it was intended for, such that the kingdom which is already near might one day finally and fully arrive, and all flesh redeemed.

So just maybe then, God the Creator is waiting on us, we, who were made in God's image, to do our part. To fulfill our end of the covenant created so long ago. For you see, the covenant is not just God's to keep with us. But ours also to keep with God. For the covenant is a two-way promise. A relationship. A real relationship between willing partners who each have a say and a stake. Now

I know, it is not perfect news, but it is astonishing good news – for we have invited into partnership with the Divine! And so yes we have a role to play, especially as God's own, especially as Christ's disciples. *We* need to be co-agents in this creation, witnessing to and proclaiming through our words and actions that the kingdom is indeed at hand. Not some distant fairytale but a reality we all must come to experience. Especially for our children. And so *we* need to take action where God can't. Where our cowardly and compromised lawmakers won't. No, we can no longer skate by on mere thoughts and prayers. For thoughts and prayers are good enough for these pews but *hugely* and *bigly* impotent out there.

So let us instead do something. Actually, really, do something. Let us not just be a memorial garden of white flags and colored t-shirts, but let us act. Let us form and become the spark for systemic change. For we can't let this be just another moment that comes and goes, where we shrug our shoulders and furrow our brows, but then go back to our meals and our feeds. No, that's willful blindness. That's willful indifference. That's not living by the covenant. That's not seeing things as they truly are, nor how they ought to immediately be. No. That's choosing to stay in the wilderness.

But now, you might be asking, what really can we do? Seriously, what can we do? What can we actually accomplish when already so many of our efforts have led to naught? When so much of the power to change policy and society is out of our hands?

Start small. Start early. Do it daily.

I told the Confirmation Class last year that the easiest, and perhaps, most powerful thing you can do as a modern believer is to befriend the friendless. The loner. The geek. Sit at the end of the lunch-table with them. Talk with them. And do it not once, but again and again. Show them through kindness, nearness, and compassion that they too are a child of God and equally worthy of affection.

My friends, do you know anyone right now on the fringes? Anyone feeling helpless? Alone? On the outside looking in? Reach out to them. Welcome them. Invite them. Show them God's amazing grace. For I truly believe that one of the most overlooked suspects in all of the tragedies we've been through is this darkness of alienation that one must have come to feel, and from such an early age. So if we can just reach them before the tipping point, before they are made to believe that they are destined only for the wilderness, then just maybe, just maybe we can inspire and see real change. No, maybe not tomorrow. But hopefully in our nearest future.

I know. It's wishy-washy. I know. It's simple.

I know. It's not perfect news.

But I believe it is the power of the gospel.

Lord, in your mercy.

Amen.