

**EARTH DAY SUNDAY 2002**  
**Protection of God's Creatures**  
**April 21, 2002 (or any Sunday throughout the year)**



**SERMON NOTES AND DISCUSSION GUIDE**

***A COMMITMENT TO ALL CREATURES: Genesis 9:1-17 by George H. Kehm<sup>1</sup>***

Everyone knows the story of the great flood, and how God ordered Noah to build an ark— a huge wooden “house boat.” When the flood came, God told Noah to bring inside a pair of “each of” the animals, two by two. So God saved not only Noah and his family but all the animal species, too. What is often forgotten in our memory of the story is that the fate of humankind and the fate of the animals were inseparably connected with the fate of the earth itself.

Whether or not God would decide to stick with the creatures of earth despite the violence that had spread from humankind and corrupted the whole earth community (*Gen. 6:11*) is the central issue in the story.

God's everlasting covenant—God's irrevocable commitment to Noah and his descendants, to the animals, and to the earth itself (*9:8-17; note v. 13*) brings the story to a climax. Bernhard Anderson calls this the ecological covenant and warns against any interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis that separates them from the history of the covenants that culminate in the covenant with Israel at Sinai.<sup>2</sup>

The first period extended from the creation to the flood. It concluded with an everlasting covenant between God and Noah, his family and descendants. Anderson also points out that this was a universal covenant in that it embraced the offspring of Noah's sons, and an ecological covenant in that it included the animals and a solemn divine pledge regarding the constancy of nature (*8:21*).

The second period extended from the time of Noah to Abraham. In this period, Almighty God makes an eternal covenant with Abraham, promising to be God to him and his descendants and granting him the land of Canaan as a perpetual holding (*17:7f*).

The third period extended from the time of Abraham to the sojourn at Sinai. There, God fulfilled the pledge to be God to Abraham's descendants by giving Israel a new name by which to call on

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<sup>1</sup>Lesson 2, from “Whose World Is it? Responding to God's Covenant with the Earth,” Presbyterian Church (USA) resource, 1991. Dr. Kehm is now retired. Formerly, he held the James Henry Snowden Chair of Systematic Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> “Creation and Ecology,” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, Bernhard W. Anderson, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1984), 167.

God (*Ex. 3:13-15*) and by being with them. God virtually lived in their midst, most vividly depicted in the stories of the tent of meeting (*Ex. 31:7-11*) and of the tabernacle (*Ex. 40:34-38*). At this point the Sabbath is regarded as the sign of the covenant between God and the people (*Ex. 31:16*). Here is the connection with the story of creation. The Sabbath, which is given brief mention there, connects Israel's purpose with the purpose of creation. It implies that Israel's redemption and fulfillment must include the redemption and fulfillment of all peoples and the whole earth community.

Later covenants do not replace or ignore the earlier ones. While the later ones are more final with respect to the degree of revelation and divine commitment to dwell with human beings, they do not displace the earlier. Rather, the later covenants include the commitments made in the earlier ones. God remains committed to bringing to fulfillment aspects of the earlier covenants not yet fulfilled. Not only will Abraham's descendants be blessed, but all nations will share in the blessing. Not only will the descendants of Noah—humankind—be blessed, but the earth and all living beings on it will share in the blessing.

The covenant with Noah makes explicit the hope for a new creation that is implicit in God's pronouncing the original creation good. This covenant came in the wake of the corruption of the original creation through the violence initiated by human beings that provoked God's decision to destroy all living creatures on the face of the earth, except Noah and those in the ark. After the destruction, God permitted a new beginning and resolved never again to curse the soil or destroy everything that lives on it because of human sinfulness. God promised this despite the persistence of the source of wickedness, the evil inclination of the human heart (*Gen. 8:21-22*) that had caused such havoc in the first place. God made an "everlasting covenant with every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (*9:16*), and even with the earth itself (*9:13-17*).

Bernhard Anderson concludes that the hope for human and nonhuman creation is grounded in the sheer grace of God's universal, ecological covenant. Despite the fact that the creation is no longer very good in the sense of a universal, "harmonious bioexuberance" (to use Holmes Rolston's wonderful expression),<sup>3</sup> God remains committed to its continuation and flourishing, as the prospect of many seedtimes and harvests—not just for Israel but for all the peoples of the earth—suggests (*8:22*).

God's covenant with Noah is the only one referred to in the Bible that is not made with people exclusively, but also with the earth and all its inhabitants, nonhuman as well as human.<sup>4</sup> Interpretations of the Bible that jump from the creation narratives to the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants, and on to the covenant with David and the new covenant of Jeremiah and the New Testament, easily slide into an anthropocentric reading of the scriptures.

This has happened often in the history of Christian theology. As we shall see, the fulfillment of creation requires a new heaven and earth since the totality God created was precisely "the heavens and the earth" (*1:1*), each ordered to the other, inseparably linked.

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<sup>3</sup> Holmes Rolston, "On Behalf of Bioexuberance," in *Garden 11*, no. 4 (July-August, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Donald Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: Genesis 1-11* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 104.

## Discussion Questions

1. The idea that God can and does make unconditional and everlasting covenants is astonishing. Does God's love for the world in Jesus Christ have this same character of irrevocable commitment? Discuss how and why you think this is or is not so.
2. Holmes Rolston, a professor of philosophy at Colorado State University, a member of the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force, and a prominent environmental ethicist, called God's covenant with Noah the "first endangered species act." If God is committed to the continuation of all the species on earth— not just the ones useful to humans, but wild animals too— what is our ethical obligation in regard to today's massive extinction of species? What can we do to halt the destruction of rain forests in the Southern hemisphere? What about endangered species in the United States of America?
3. In early times, all animal slaughter was sacrificial. Later, when animals were killed for food, special ceremonies reminded people that all life belongs to God. Current factory farming methods of producing meat and fur show little reverence for animal life. What steps can individuals, families, and churches take to change this?