



# *The Sacred Pact*

Embracing God's Promises for Us





# Journey Introduction

Welcome to this year's journey! We are always grateful for the opportunity to gather together in community to study scripture and grow in faith together. This year we gather under the umbrella of God's promises made known to us in scripture through the ancient practice of covenant making.

Those who work in the financial world are familiar with bond covenants. They are legally binding agreements between two parties to assure the ability to repay the loaned funds. Covenants in today's world are generally used in the legal arena. This usage emanates from the origins of the word in militaristic and political usage in agreements between nations, and this begins to indicate how the word came to be used in descriptions of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh their God.

The first place where we see the term used in the Bible is in Genesis in the covenant that God made with Noah. Then we see it again with Abraham and Moses. It becomes the primary way of describing the agreement between God and the people that governed their relationship. Just as Israel might sign a covenant with another nation to assure a military alliance or peaceful coexistence. Israel is given promises from God. So then a key question of the Old Testament becomes, which covenants are more important and where can people ultimately place their trust? These are key questions that will undergird our study of these promises as well as challenging ourselves to consider where we place our trust.

It is also important to note that there are key differences between the covenants between God and the people and their alliances with other nations. First of all, a key part of creating a covenant between two

parties in this world is the role of negotiation. It is rare for both parties to be on equal ground, nevertheless, they make use of whatever advantage they may have to secure as favorable of terms as possible for themselves. In the covenants of God, there is no negotiation. It is God who is determining all of the terms. With any other party this would be a lousy deal. It would mean the worst possible terms for us. But with God, we find we are in a far different place which leads to point number two.

A covenant with Yahweh, is a covenant with a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding with steadfast love (Exodus 34:6). There are two-way covenants with God that contain requirements of the people, but the central covenants of scripture are not conditional. They are not based upon expectations of the people. The primary covenants of scripture arise out of God's unconditional love for us. This is why we talk about baptism as a covenant, and the more that we understand the other covenants of scripture, the more we can trust in God's promises for us in our baptism. And the more we trust the promise, the freer and more empowered we will be to respond to this covenant with lives of loving service for the world.

I am so grateful that you have chosen to join us on journey this year! Lent is a time of preparation for those who will be baptized at Easter, but it is also an opportunity for each of us to be renewed in our own baptismal promises. I pray that this journey leads you to a growing trust in God's promises for you, deeper relationships with your fellow journey-goers, and a renewed commitment to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

Pastor Jonathan

# Week One Readings

## Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

## 1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

## Mark 1:9-15

### *The Baptism of Jesus*

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

### *The Temptation of Jesus*

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

### *The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry*

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Week One: February 18 - 24

# Noah

Peter connects the way God saved Noah's family in the flood with the way God saves us through the water of baptism. The baptismal covenant is made with us individually, but the new life we are given in baptism is for the sake of the whole world.

## Host Begins

Welcome to week one of our Lenten Journey! As we begin, let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. **Please say your name and what your favorite animal is and why.**

That might seem like a bit of a silly question, but it leads into our scripture for the week—God's covenant with Noah! This Journey we'll be discussing God's covenants throughout the Bible. The definition of covenant is "a usually formal, solemn, and binding agreement". In the Old Testament, there were multiple types of covenants and they were legally binding. God's covenants throughout the Bible are structured like promissory covenants of the time, which were covenants made between a ruler and a vassal. In these covenants, a vassal would promise to serve the ruler. In return, the ruler would offer protection, blessings, and even threaten curses if it wasn't upheld.

Even today, some covenants are legally binding. For instance, if you're a part of a

Homeowner's Association, you are a part of a covenant. More often though, if we use the word "covenant" at all, we usually aren't talking about legal contracts.

Various groups might set out covenants so that members know what is expected of them and what they can expect to get out of participating in the group. Certain relationships are described as covenants, particularly marriage.

**What comes to mind for you when you think of covenants?**

**How does it affect our understanding of biblical covenants to know that covenants were legal contracts in that time and place?**

## New Reader

The story of Noah and his ark is well known. It's a story we often tell to children, probably because it's full of animals. However, when you look closer, there's a lot of death and despair that the kiddo's bibles gloss over.

## Week ONE

In Genesis, we read that the Lord saw and grieved the wickedness of humankind, and decided to wipe out all that the Lord had created. The people, animals, birds, and creeping things are all going away, except for Noah and his family (Genesis 6). Noah follows the directions the Lord gives him for the ark, and goes into the ark with pairs of animals just as the Lord said, with the Lord shutting them all into the ark. And it rains and rains and rains and everything on the dry land dies (Genesis 7).

### **New Reader**

But God remembers Noah and all the passengers of the ark and, eventually, the waters dry up and Noah, his family, and all the animals can leave. God tells them to be fruitful and multiply, an echo from the first creation story, and life on the earth goes on. Noah builds an altar and offers burnt offerings to God, and God makes a promise to never again curse the ground or destroy every living creature (Genesis 8).

### **New Reader**

And, after all this, we get to the scripture for the week. Read Genesis 9:8-17 (page 4).

### **New Reader**

The weight of all life on dry land being destroyed by a flood really puts into perspective the gravity of God's covenant with Noah. God's directions after the flood marks a re-creation of the world. God's covenant with Noah and everything that lives is that God will never again destroy life on earth with a flood. This promise is between God and every living creature on earth. Every single one. Anything that came out of the ark is a part of what God is doing for us.

This promise is unconditional, and God did not ask anything of creation. God is willing to change, to work to transform the world from the inside instead of using power and destruction. People are still sinful in nature, and God is the one changing the approach.

**Have you ever had to change tactics when trying to change behaviors? (At work, parenting, social groups?)**

**What methods have been successful in changing a group's behaviors and dynamics?**

**Why do you think this was God's approach?**

### **New Reader**

God sets the bow in the clouds as a sign of this covenant for all. We read it as a rainbow – a rainbow often appears in the sky after the rain. The Hebrew word used for bow is used throughout the Old Testament, with all other references being to a bow and arrow. God sets a bow in the clouds as a way of showing that God will never use destruction on the world again. The rainbow isn't just for us, it's a reminder for God as well. Throughout the rest of the bible, we can see God doesn't use water for destruction, but instead water is used to show God's life giving presence.

**Can you name other times water is an important part of a bible story?**

### **New Reader**

Peter connects the way God saved Noah's family in the flood with the way God saves us through the waters of baptism. Read 1 Peter 3:18-22 (page 4).

# Week ONE

There are some clear parallels between baptism and God's covenant with Noah. Both involve cleansing waters that destroy sin. Both are completely God's grace, given to us unconditionally. Both promise new life. Author Rachel Held Evans once wrote, "Baptism reminds us that there's no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair." (Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, 2015)

**As you think about our baptismal covenant in light of God's covenant with Noah, what observations do you have?**

**Do you find it a helpful comparison? Why or why not?**

**What about RHE's quote resonates with you?**

## **Host Closes**

God's covenant with Noah is one of the many covenants we will discuss on this Journey. We'll close with a prayer from the ELW order of "Thanksgiving for Baptism".

We give you thanks, O God,  
for in the beginning your Spirit moved  
over the waters  
and by your Word you created the world,  
calling forth life in which you took delight.

Through the waters of the flood you  
delivered Noah and his family.

Through the sea you led your people  
Israel from slavery into freedom.  
At the river your Son was baptized by  
John and anointed with the Holy Spirit.  
By water and your Word you claim us as  
daughters and sons,  
making us heirs of your promise and  
servants of all.

We praise you for the gift of water that  
sustains life,  
and above all we praise you for the gift of  
new life in Jesus Christ.  
Shower us with your Spirit,  
and renew our lives with your forgiveness,  
grace, and love.

To you be given honor and praise  
through Jesus Christ our Lord  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and  
forever.  
Amen.

## INDIVIDUAL Challenge

If you haven't given up something for Lent (or even if you have!), consider what in your life might need God's cleansing baptismal waters. Are you struggling with apathy? Fear? Hurt that won't heal? Despair? Whatever it is, consider giving it to God this Lent and see what new life God brings out of that process.

- Find a way to care for nature this week.
- Donate pet food to an animal shelter.
- Clean up an outdoor space. Contribute to a group that does environmental work.
- Pray for those affected by flooding and other natural disasters this week.

# Week Two Readings

## Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

### *The Sign of the Covenant*

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

## Romans 4:13-25

### *God's Promise Realized through Faith*

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

## Mark 8:31-38

### *Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection*

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'



**Week Two: February 25 - March 2**

# Abraham and Sarah

God's promise to make Abraham and Sarah the ancestors of many, with whom God will remain in everlasting covenant. Paul says this promise comes to all who share Abraham's faith in the God who brings life into being where there was no life. We receive this baptismal promise of resurrection life in faith. Sarah and Abraham receive new names as a sign of the covenant, and we too get new identities in baptism, as we put on Christ.

## **Host Begins**

Welcome back everyone! Thanks for joining us again or for the first time this week as we center ourselves around the promises God makes to us in scripture called covenants. Last week we dug into a pretty familiar story - the story of Noah - one that has a dark beginning but ends with a rainbow - literally.

**As we start, let's lighten up the mood a little and recall a favorite nickname from childhood - either one of yours or someone you knew. Anyone can start.**

Nicknames have power and purpose in community. They unite us and give us

common language. You know that the disciples had to have nicknames - no one was calling Bartholomew his full name each day! And we know that Thomas was called "the Twin". Names have always mattered to God too - since creation and throughout scripture - God has used names to signify meaning and often a turning point in a story. The story from our focus scripture today, Genesis 17, is no different.

## **New Reader**

But before we get there, a brief retelling of what has happened in Abram and Sarai's lives leading up to that point may help provide some context.

## Week TWO

### **Genesis 11**

Tower of Babel -  
"Let's make a name for ourselves"

### **Genesis 12**

God tells Abram to "Go!" "I will make of you a great nation...I will bless those who bless you" Abram and family pack up and go towards Canaan - God makes his first promises to Abram - the start of covenant language. Complications arise in Egypt (Google it!)

### **Genesis 13**

Abram and Lot (son of Abram's brother) go their separate ways. The Lord promises Abram the land &

### **Genesis 14**

Lot is captured & rescued by Abram and we meet King Melchizedek who blesses Abram. Abram refuses to accept a reward from the King of Sodom - indicating his commitment & faithfulness to the One God.

### **Genesis 15**

The word of the Lord appears to Abram in a vision and the Lord expands the covenant saying, "Look toward the heaven and count the stars...so shall your descendants be." Abram brought animals to sacrifice to the Lord and literally "cut" a covenant.

### **Genesis 16**

As time went on and Abram and Sarai bore no children of their own, they took matters into their own hands and "Sarai, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went into Hagar, and she conceived". Ishmael was born."

### **How familiar is that story to you? What parts surprised you? What parts had you forgotten?**

And now, let's pick up in Genesis 17 where this week's covenant focus takes off:

#### **New Reader**

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Read Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (page 8).

#### **New Reader**

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So, after a pretty complicated few chapters of scripture and 99 years of life for Abram, the Lord appears to Abram. Again the Lord speaks familiar words about offspring, God promises an everlasting covenant and one that will produce nations and kings. As people of the promise - we know that down that Abrahamic line will eventually come Jesus. On top of these generous promises, an expectation is placed upon Abram in the partnership. God invites Abram to continue in relationship: "walk before me and be blameless". We can understand "blamelessness" as an invitation to a deeper faithfulness and connectedness with God.

In addition, as with Noah's story, there is a sign of the covenant (marked by circumcision in the verses left out by our lectionary) and also a seemingly slight name change with significant meaning:

#### **New Reader**

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A new identity called for a new name. Both Abram and Sarai were "renamed" by God. In giving them new names, the Lord did something extraordinary. He took letters from his own name - "Yahweh" - and gave one to each. In Hebrew, only the consonants are recorded, so Yahweh is written YHWH. (The vowels are added in speech as

the text is read aloud.) God took his two "H's" and gave one each to Abram and Sarai so that their names became Abraham and Sarah. Abraham became the "father of many nations" and Sarah remained a "princess," but now her children would carry the mark of heaven's King.

Covenant is about "two becoming one," and the identities of the partners are shared. God shows his amazing commitment to his Covenant partners in the gift of the letters of his name."

*Covenant and Kingdom: DNA of the Bible*  
by Mike Breen

In scripture, when names change, it signifies a beginning of a new era.

### **Can you think of some other examples of significant name changes in the Bible?**

### **How do you think Abraham and Sarah might have felt during this major life transition?**

### **What are some of the "big chapters" of your life so far?**

### **What are some of the markers of the beginning and ends of those eras?**

#### **New Reader**

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What comes next? Well even though it's not in this week's text, we know that Abraham and Sarah listened to God's big promises, looked at their current status (pushing 100 years old), and did what anyone would do: laughed. They were both in awe (Abraham had already fallen on his face to worship God in verse 2) but they also followed obediently. This signified that this covenant was built on a mutual relationship. This is an

important time in scripture where we see a strong woman who will share in the promises of the family.

As God came to Abraham and Noah and others throughout scripture, we can find ourselves feeling frustrated or looking for evidence of God's "showing up" in our own lives - perhaps we are looking for our own name change moments. Lucky for us, we too are offered a transformative experience - it might look differently for each of us.

**When was a time you laughed at how something worked out in your life?**

**When has God's timing surprised you?**

**How have you experienced God's transformation? (Think big; think small!)**

### New Reader

A key moment for transformation in the lives of Lutherans is baptism - whether you have yet to be baptized, were baptized as an infant or somewhere in between - that is a time when we live into the New Covenant made with Jesus.

*For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of*

*Abraham (for he is the father of all of us).*

- Romans 4:16

And because we are saved by grace through that very faith, we are welcomed into the Body of Christ into the life-changing waters of baptism. Just as God became one with Abraham and Sarah in the giving of their names, God names us beloved children in our baptism and we become one with Christ.

We can remember these promises on a daily basis, a minute-by-minute basis. They can serve as a reminder that even though it is our faith (or the faith of our parents) that may bring us to the font, it is God's love that comes for us - just as it came for Abraham and Sarah and as it transformed their lives, it can transform ours.

### Prayer

God and Father of all the faithful, you promised your servant Abraham that he would become the father of many nations, and through this gift of faith you increase your chosen people throughout the world. Form us anew by the death of your Son, that we may joyfully accept the new life of grace given through him, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW)

## INDIVIDUAL Challenge

The Affirmation of Baptism provides five faith practices to integrate into our daily life.

Receive each as a gift from God:

**Live** among God's faithful people,

**Hear** the word of God and

**share** in the Lord's supper,

**Proclaim** the good news of God in Christ

through word and deed,

**Serve** all people following the example of Jesus and **Strive** for justice and peace in all the earth.

Think through practical ways you might do each of these in the next week.

Need some ideas? Head to

**[elca.org/Resources/Faith-Practices](http://elca.org/Resources/Faith-Practices)**



Listen to or read this sermon from Nadia Bolz Weber on the transformative power of baptism.

# Week Three Readings

## Exodus 20:1-17

### *The Ten Commandments*

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

### *Christ the Power and Wisdom of God*

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

## John 2:13-22

### *Jesus Cleanses the Temple*

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Week Three: March 3 - 9

# Ten Commandments



The commandments begin with the statement that because God alone has freed us from the powers that oppressed us, we are to let nothing else claim first place in our lives. When Jesus throws the merchants out of the temple, he is defending the worship of God alone and rejecting the ways commerce and profit-making can become our gods. The Ten Commandments are essential to our baptismal call: centered first in God's liberating love, we strive to live out justice and mercy in our communities and the world.

## **Host Begins**

Welcome back! We're glad you're here. Today, we're talking about the covenant of the Ten Commandments.

**To begin, think of a time you've been given a task to complete and you were not given any guidance on how to do it.**

**Did you enjoy the experience or find it stressful?**

**Would you consider yourself a rule follower? Why or why not?**

**Has that changed at different points in your life?**

Some of us love rules and some of us bristle against them. Some thrive with clearly laid out expectations, and others struggle when things feel rigid.

## **New Reader**

The Ten Commandments are at times presented as rigid rules that we must follow or God will be angry. There are a lot of "nots" in them, so it is easy to see how that idea developed. However, it is more accurate to see them as guidelines for how to live well. The Commandments are gifts, showing us how to live in the freedom God's gives us in Christ.

### **Have you ever looked at the Ten Commandments as a gift from God?**

**How has that been true in your life? If it hasn't, why not?**

#### **New Reader**

The Hebrew people had been freed from slavery through God's mighty acts, like the ten plagues and parting of the Red Sea. Once in the wilderness, food was scarce and their future uncertain, but God continued to provide. Manna and quail filled their stomachs and God's instructions gave them direction for their future. After they arrived at Mt. Sinai, Moses was told to go up to the mountain to speak to God. God told him to speak these words to the people.

Read Exodus 20: 1-17 (page 13).

#### **New Reader**

Notice how the commandments begin with God's reminder, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." The covenant of the Ten Commandments begins, as all covenants do, with God's love and grace.

Thus began a new way of life for the Hebrew people. God chose them, claimed them, and freed them from slavery. They were God's people. They were called to focus on God and love one another.

We too are chosen, claimed, and freed in our baptism. **What does it mean to you to be named "child of God"?**

We too are called to love one another. **What are some meaningful ways you've**

**received care from another?**

**Can you share a time that you served another and it impacted you?**

#### **New Reader**

The tricky part about being God's people is that much of what God commands is counterintuitive to us. We easily fall into jealousy, selfishness, and fear. God calls us to be compassionate, generous, and faithfully confident.

The Ten Commandments help us do just that. They show us how to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and how to love our neighbors as ourselves. They help us live out our baptismal promises.

In his explanation to the First Commandment, Martin Luther wrote, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is your God."

**What are some other things people are tempted to rely on instead of God?**

**If you're comfortable sharing, what are you tempted to make an idol?**

#### **New Reader**

It is easy for us to worship idols. Sometimes, we focus our time and energy on the wrong things. Other times, we focus on very good things, but they become our primary focus in life instead of God.

Read John 2:13-22 (page 13).

In this dramatic scene, Jesus drives out the money changers and others who corrupted worship practices of the faithful.

## Week THREE

His response is a powerful reminder that worshiping God and God alone is our highest priority in life. Using God as a tool to achieve other ends not only breaks the first commandment, it harms other people as well.

**Where have you seen people use God as a means to an end, a weapon, or a prop?**

**Treasured traditions can quickly become idols when we focus more on the tradition than on God - what can help us guard against that risk?**

### New Reader

Even the "easy" commandments to keep become more complicated when we remember that Jesus said that even calling someone a fool violates the commandment not to kill. (Matthew 5:21-26) Or we recall that Luther expands our understanding of the eighth commandment to include building people up with our words and deeds, not simply avoiding lying about others. (cite) Luther contended that the Law (including the Ten Commandments) acts as a mirror for us, showing us the ways we sin and fall short of the glory of God. Realizing this again turns us toward Christ, who saves us from that sin.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (page 13).

Though it seems unbelievable that God would save us through the death and resurrection of his Son, we remain thankful that God's ways are not our ways. We do not put God first in our lives consistently and we do not love our neighbors as ourselves. We cannot and do not need to earn God's love or our place at God's table. It is all because of Christ crucified. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we know that even when we fail to keep the commandments, God

forgives and empowers us to try again.

**Can you think of an example of when God's wisdom seemed like foolishness to us? If it's a personal example, what practices helped you trust that God's wisdom?**

**When you fail to live and love like Jesus, what helps you experience God's grace and empowers you to try again?**

### New Reader

As baptized children of God, we can grow in faith and trust. We can get better, if never perfect, at keeping the Ten Commandments. Read together the promises made at our baptism.

You are entrusted with responsibilities:  
to live among God's faithful people,  
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,  
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,  
to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,  
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

Spend a few moments reading over the Ten Commandments again.

**Which ones help you live among God's faithful people? Hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper? Proclaim the good news of Christ? Serve all people? Strive for justice and peace? Share your initial reactions with one another.**



### Host Closing

Luther encouraged us to remember our baptism every morning. Though our Affirmation of Baptism rite is usually first done when we were in our early teens, there is no limit to how often we can affirm the promises made at our baptism. The more often we remember God's baptismal covenant with us, the easier it is for us to focus on God - and keep God's commandments!

We'll close with Luther's morning blessing, which really works any time of the day.

I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected me this night from all harm and danger, and I ask that you would also protect me today from sin and all evil, so that my life and actions may please you completely. For into your hands I commend myself, my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.



## INDIVIDUAL Challenge

- Use Luther's morning blessing when you begin your day.
- Try to live out one of the Ten Commandments in a new way this week. Intentionally build someone up by offering them a compliment.
- Find a way, however small, to work for justice.
- Spend more time in prayer.
- Take an unexpected opportunity to help others.
- Remembering that the commandments help us build community, thank God each day for someone who is in our faith community. If you're able, let that person know you thanked God for them!

### Special Invitation

Join us this week for

#### HOPE RISING

A Prayer Vigil for Haiti  
and Our Global Neighbors

Wednesday, March 6  
8 AM-8 PM

Presentations by Maya from Haiti  
at 11 AM and 7 PM.

# Week Four Readings

## Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

## Ephesians 2:1-10

### *From Death to Life*

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

## John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

Week Four: March 10 - 16

# Bronze Serpent



The fourth of the Old Testament promises providing a baptismal lens this Lent is the promise God makes to Moses: those who look on the bronze serpent will live. In today's gospel Jesus says he will be lifted up on the cross like the serpent, so that those who look to him in faith will live. When we receive the sign of the cross in baptism, that cross becomes the sign we can look to in faith for healing, for restored relationship to God, for hope when we are dying.

## **Host Begins**

Well, congratulations for making it to week four of the Journey!

This week we will discuss the story of Moses and the serpent of bronze and how it prefigures the crucifixion and exaltation of Jesus...

**To get started let's begin by sharing our most memorable snake stories.**

## **New Reader**

"Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?" (Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark). I can only imagine that this must have been quite the same sentiment that the Israelites were experiencing.

Read Numbers 21:4-9 (page 19)

## **Host**

It is part and parcel of the human condition to be dissatisfied with what we have on occasion. The people in this passage

## Week FOUR

complain without irony to Moses that “there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” The self-contradicting nature of this statement seems lost on them, but begs the question- **when have we felt this same way in our modern lives?**

**Have you seen this in your own life, or in the lives of the people around you?**

### New Reader

God offers a solution to their dilemma with the bronze serpent lifted by Moses. What God did not do is remove the snakes. People were still bitten. Being bitten by a venomous snake hurts. A lot. But they were given the gift of life.

**What do you think this might tell us about our relationship to God?**

**What does this tell us of how our expectations concerning God’s provision in our lives might shift a bit from what we want in life versus what we need in life?**

### New Reader

Later on in scripture in the book of 2 Kings chapter 18 we find that Israel has a new King. This King Hezekiah brought a new era of righteousness with him. He broke down altars and high places and many things that had distracted the people from their focus on the one true God. And guess what one of those things was that he smashed? You guessed it... it was Moses’ bronze serpent on the pole. After all this time, the people of Israel had come to worship the serpent (now called Nehushtan), and neglected the creator of the serpent. They focused on the provision, and not the provider.

**Can you think of instances where focus on the provision obscures our vision of the Provider?**

**How might the traditional practices of Lent (fasting, prayer, and generosity) help us to keep our gaze on God and our service directed out to the world?**

### New Reader

Read John 3:14-21 (page 18).

### New Reader

It seems odd at first that Jesus chooses to compare himself to the bringer of death and suffering in the Old Testament reading, but it is true that the form of the serpent then also brings life.

We now know in modern times that anti-venom can be made from venom. The most fertile soils are created from rot and decay. Baptism is a death of sorts, a drowning of our self-hood to be reborn through the clear waters of life with Christ.

**What other patterns do you see in life or scripture where this paradox of death being a bringer of new life plays out?**

**How have you seen death bring new life?**

Maybe the serpent was lifted to raise our human gaze upward? Upward towards our God and Creator? And then we lift high the cross, that symbol of death and suffering that is also the cross we mark on our foreheads to remember our baptism. And again exalt the Savior of humankind.

## Week FOUR

### Prayer

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ was lifted high upon the cross so that he might draw the whole world to himself. To those who look upon the cross, grant your wisdom, healing, and eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW)



### INDIVIDUAL Challenge

Where can you identify Manna in your own life?

The Israelites were well provided for in the wilderness, but they were rarely satisfied.

How can you work toward a place of contentment and satisfaction for the good that you already have in your life?

Apply one of the Lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer, or generosity to your life this week and take note of how it might help you keep your gaze on God.

# Week Five Readings

## Jeremiah 31:31-34

### *A New Covenant*

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

## Hebrews 5:5-10

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'; as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.'

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

## John 12:20-33

### *Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus*

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.'

### *Jesus Speaks about His Death*

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Week Five: March 17 - 23

# New Covenant

God promises Jeremiah that a “new covenant” will be made in the future: a covenant that will allow all the people to know God by heart. The church sees this promise fulfilled in Christ, who draws all people to himself when he is lifted up on the cross. Our baptismal covenant draws us to God’s heart through Christ and draws God’s love and truth into our hearts.

## **Host, begin reading**

Welcome back to the final week of this year’s journey. Whether you have been able to join us for every week or just for a few, we trust that God is using this time to help you grow. This is something to celebrate together.

**What is an accomplishment that you are proud of in your life? Can you think of a particular accomplishment that included a memorable celebration?**

## **New Reader**

Accomplishments in life matter, because they are an indication that we followed through on a commitment that we have made to do something good for ourselves and for others. These commitments matter, and God knows just how much they matter. This is why God takes covenants so seriously. God knows that God’s promises

are transformational in our lives, and it is our ability to trust in these promises that propel us into making loving commitments of our own. In Christianity, this is what we call the freedom of the Gospel. The grace of God frees us from an inward preoccupation with scorekeeping and approval earning. God has already said a complete and eternal yes to us in Jesus, so we are free to respond with lives of loving gratitude by serving others.

**What is an example of a conditional promise in your life, where someone promises to do something IF you do something in return?**

**When have you experienced an unconditional promise from someone?**

**How did that make you feel?**

### **New Reader**

One of the defining experiences of the Israelites was the Babylonian exile. The exile happens because the people of Israel ceased to listen and follow the commands of God. The prophets tell us about how the people have turned their back on God. We will look at two passages today that speak to the promises of God coming out of the Babylonian exile. In both Isaiah and Jeremiah, there is much judgement of the way that the leaders and the people turn their back on God. They trust in themselves, their possessions, other Gods, and other leaders instead of Yahweh. All of this led to the exile as a way for the people to understand the costs of injustice and unfaithfulness.

As they begin their return to the land, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah paint a new picture of the covenant that God makes with the people.

The 55th chapter of Isaiah is the concluding chapter of what is known as 2nd Isaiah. It constitutes the parting words before the people return from exile to Jerusalem. It is setting forth new expectations of how the people will live in relationship with God. Let's read a part of this chapter:

I will make with you an everlasting  
covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.  
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the  
peoples.  
See, you shall call nations that you do not  
know,  
and nations that do not know you shall  
run to you,  
because of the Lord your God, the Holy  
One of Israel,

for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake their way,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord, that he may  
have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly  
pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the  
Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the  
earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

### **New Reader**

The passage begins with the unconditional promise that the covenant is for all time. And it acknowledges that the people will fall short of their side of the covenant. What is required is certainly not perfection. What is required is that the people stay in relationship with God. What is required is that they continue to trust God and seek God's way. God will "abundantly pardon" those who "return to the Lord." The promise is clear. God will not give up on the people, and so the prophet implores the people to not give up on God.

**What part of these promises stands out to you?**

**What makes that Good News for you?**

### **New Reader**

The prophet Jeremiah was writing to the same people in the passage assigned for today.

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34 (page 22).



## Week FIVE

Jeremiah indicates that God is deeply discouraged by the injustice that he witnesses among the people. But God has never required perfection in the way that people live. Jeremiah paints a vision of what God desires in this passage that has less to do with perfection and more to do with faithfulness. Jeremiah is painting a picture here of a community that internalizes the promises of God.

Old Testament scholar, Dr. Corrine Carvalho writes this about this passage,

“What Jeremiah 31 envisions is an interior torah (often translated as “law”) as the necessary linchpin for transforming a community. While that torah does contain legal requirements, its general meaning is “teaching” or perhaps better a system that inculcates justice. I admit that when I read some of the laws in the Pentateuch, I do not always see a just system, but that is not what the word here intends. It expresses the realization that the only systemic structure that can truly enact justice cannot be made by human decrees. It stems from a conversion to full recognition of the nature of God, the depth of divine grace, and the servanthood to community that flows from this epiphany.

This passage reminds us that systemic justice is both promise and enactment. Although the promise cannot be achieved by our own efforts, the passage calls our faith communities to live into that promise through our own communal incarnation, inadequate though they may be, that attempt to embody an interior culture of gratitude and servanthood.”

**What do think it means for us to “to embody an interior culture of gratitude and servanthood”?**

**What would be signs of this being true for us as a community?**

### **New Reader**

Since the time of the early church, Christians have understood this new covenant in Jeremiah in relationship to the promises of baptism. In baptism, the promises of God’s grace and mercy are internalized and free us from the game of self-focus to live for the sake of others. Of course, we have a challenging time trusting this promise. We hear the words in Jeremiah and Isaiah that promise the steadfastness of God’s grace, but baptism helps us to trust this promise more fully because of the visible sign of the cross. Jesus died and rose for us to know that the promise is true for us. And God gives us the gifts of water, bread, and wine to touch and taste and know this grace more securely in our lives. God knows that we need to trust these promises completely to know that we are both free and empowered to live our lives for the sake of others. We can go more deeply into a “culture of gratitude and servanthood” when we trust these promises more fully.

**How have you understood the grace and freedom given in baptism in your life?**

**How has that understanding evolved over time?**

**How does grace impact the way that you live out your faith in your daily life?**

**How might God be inviting you to grow in your trust of these promises as an outcome of this Journey?**

## Week FIVE

### Host Closing

As we end our official time together in this journey, we invite everyone who would like to share one thing they will be taking away from this journey and one thought, concept, false belief, or habit they will leave behind.

### **Take Away:**

### **Leave Behind:**

### Closing Prayer

Oh God, we thank you for this journey and for your promises that transform our lives and enliven your kingdom among us. Empower us by the gift of the Holy Spirit to trust in you and your abiding love for us more fully. And send us out into the world with words and actions that convey your love and draw others to your promises. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## INDIVIDUAL Challenge

Begin each day this week by splashing water on your face and tracing the sign of the cross, remembering these words, "The God of your baptism loves and cares for you always".

At the end of the day, trace the sign of the cross and pray, "Thank you God for your forgiveness and grace that make me new each day. Help me to live more fully in your promises tomorrow."

At the end of the week, take stock of how being more intentionally aware of these promises affects the way that live out your faith each day.





## Notes

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