

Stories of the Hebrew Bible

Lesson 2: Noah and the Flood – Promises and Covenants

1.29.2017

Objectives: Exploring archetypal story of promises and covenanting.

Materials: flipchart, colored paper, markers, tape, lesson attachment.

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What is one important promise you have kept over time?
 - ▶ Have you ever broken an important promise?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: “One Minute, Please!” (5 minutes max)

Pair youth up randomly. Each taking turns, the aim of the game is to talk for one minute on a given subject. Teacher announces the topic and one person in the pair has to speak for one minute on that topic. Then switch. Choose subjects to stimulate the imagination and which may be amusing. Put a stopwatch on each turn to see how long they last before drying up! Subjects might include: my 3 favorite places in the world, why short/long haircuts are good for you, 10 things you can do with duct tape, recipes that should include Nutella, famous people’s lives I’d try out.

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

Teacher reads: (paraphrased from Sam Wells, theologian and ethicist)

“Covenants are acts of trust rather than distrust. And with covenants, the important question is not whether you know what you are promising (ask any parent or newlywed whether they really knew what they were promising). The important question is whether you are the kind of person who can be held to a promise you made when you did not fully know what you were promising.”

4. **Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **Introduction to Noah and the Flood Story** (15 minutes)

Teacher talk: *What do we already know about this story?* Just as with many popular stories we have heard, from *Cinderella* to the *Three Little Pigs*, the tale of Noah's Ark has been told in many different ways. What do youth recall about this story?

- On a flipchart, write down what youth feel they already know about this story and what message/meaning the story is trying to convey.
- Share these helpful background information about the story:
 - In biblical times, people imagined the earth/ground as located between two great bodies of water: water *above* that gave rain and water *below* that seeped up.
 - Ancient people also believed that God would punish them by shooting arrows of lightning from a bow in the sky; so a rainbow (empty of any arrows) after a storm meant they were in God's good graces once again.
 - According to the Hebrew Bible, Noah's ark was built out of gopher wood. Scholars and historians do not yet know what exactly gopher wood was.
 - In the Hebrew Bible version, God sends the flood as punishment for humanity's violence and corruption.
 - The word "covenant" refers to a promise, but a particular kind of promise as we shall learn.
 - The (attached) version of Noah's Ark story for this lesson is a compilation of two ancient versions: the Hebrew and the Mesopotamian.

6. **Noah and the Great Flood** (20 minutes)

Hand out copies of the attached story of *Noah and the Great Flood*, and invite volunteers to read portions aloud.

Questions for Discussion:

- How is this version of the story similar or different from youths' first comments and memories about the story?

- The dove repeatedly returns to the ark, but why does the raven not? (*Hint: bit morbid but think about the raven as a bird that feeds chiefly on carrion, floating on the floodwaters.*)
- Strictly from the reading of the story itself (so keeping out prior interpretations we may have heard), is this a story about destruction or more a story about saving?

Note the following:

- Why such detail about bringing two of every living thing, down to every creeping insect?
- Why the details about storing up food?
- Why such repeated detail about the dove's flight and ensuring that the waters had receded?
- Why end with the focus on the rainbow and the covenant never to flood and destroy the earth?
- Invite volunteers to read the opening verses from the Book of Genesis (attached), especially mindful of boldfaced details. Given so many parallels to the original story of creation in Genesis, what is the story of Noah and the Flood trying to say? What is its main purpose?

(Hint: The Jewish tradition reads this story as a second creation, or Re-Creation, of God trying to start over again. Contrary to being a story about death and destruction, the story focuses much greater detail on saving life and starting over again!)

7. Special Promise Known as Covenant (15 minutes)

Teacher leads discussion: Consider Noah's story as a story about promises, a special and powerful promise called a "covenant." Imagine when there is no storm cloud in sight, being asked to build an ark, 450 feet long and three stories high! But Noah follows through and builds an ark, trusting in God's covenant to keep them safe. And later, God covenants with Noah (and the earth!) to never again use a flood to destroy the earth. These are huge promises!

- How likely or unlikely are you to trust in a huge promise made by someone?
- What factors do you consider before taking them up on their promise?
- In modern legal society, what do we have to help insure against loss or injury when someone breaks their promise? (*We draw up contracts with lawyers to enforce.*)
- So what do think may be the difference between a *contract* and *covenant*?
 - Read the Sam Wells quote again, read during Chalice Lighting.
 - Read this excerpt from David Brooks of *The New York Times*: "When we go out and do a deal, we make a contract. A contract protects interests, but a covenant protects relationships. A covenant exists between people who understand they are

part of one another. It involves a vow to serve the relationship that is sealed by love... You take away that rich social fabric and what you are left with is people who are uncertain about who they really are. It's hard to live daringly when your very foundation is fluid and at risk."

- People in a contract provide one another services, but people in a covenant offer the gift of relationship with one another.

8. **Covenant Activity** (10 minutes)

Teacher introduces: Various cultures include hand gestures when people make promises. We might shake hands or place our hand over our heart. Elected officials may hold one hand up in the air, or place it on a sacred text, when being sworn into office and taking on the vow to serve to the best of their ability.

- On colored paper, have youth trace their hands and cut them out. On each cut-out hand, ask them to write some promise they would like to keep – to themselves, family, friends, someone specific, school, church, or the world. Tell youth to come up with a promise that can be shared in public, as these will be posted on the wall. Give youth an example of a promise you can make and keep.
- Provide enough time so each youth can share what they have written.
- Make a rainbow on the wall, taping up the hands. (Add to any rainbows created by earlier classes to make it larger and more full.)

9. **Say goodbye until next time:** Extinguish the chalice, saying:

"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."

10. **Help clean up classroom** before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets