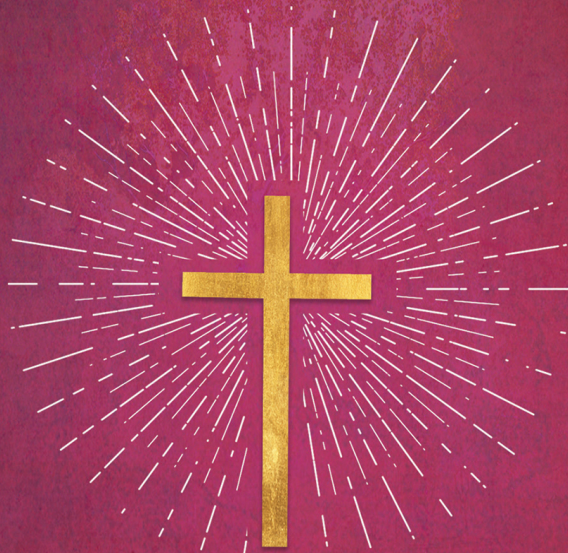


# REMEMBER



God's Covenants  
*and the Cross*



SUSAN ROBB



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# CHAPTER ONE

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## Noah: God's Covenant with Creation

*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.”*

*(Genesis 9:8-17)*

I have spent my entire life as a resident of Texas, and I love it. In Texas, we often say, “If you don’t like the weather in Texas, just wait a few minutes.” Although that seems to be a common motto in other states as well, the truth is that the weather in Texas is relatively predictable—well, most of the time—at least in

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the summers. It's almost a certainty that mid-May to at least mid-September will be hot, extremely hot, and that fall is just a cooler summer, with the changing colors and dropping of tree leaves occurring one day in November. That may be an exaggeration, but not by much.

However, winters in Texas can bring great variety in temperatures and weather patterns. On one December weekend, you might experience gorgeous, eighty-degree temperatures as you sit by the pool. The very next weekend, you could be walking in a winter wonderland and shoveling a bit of snow from your sidewalk. The truth about winter in Texas is that temperatures rarely dip below freezing, at least in my neck of the woods, and if they do, it's not by much, and it doesn't last long.

February 2021 was an exception. Just when we thought we had left the word "unprecedented" behind in 2020 with the COVID-19 crisis, the Great Texas Snowstorm arrived. As a friend of mine remarked, "I'm pretty tired of living in unprecedented times and events!" In some respects, we felt as if we were living in the unprecedented times of Noah during that week. Instead of rain falling for forty days and nights, it seemed as if the snow and ice would never stop, or that the freezing temperatures that dropped into the teens and single digits would never end. When the cold abated, the rains came, not pouring from clouds in the sky, but from millions of burst water pipes that froze when the Texas power grid failed and countless homes were left without heat (and then, of course, water). The indoor rains literally flooded thousands of homes and businesses. We all felt more than a little like Noah.

You are probably familiar with the story of Noah, if for no other reason than from days spent in children's Sunday school classes, or from seeing colorful images in children's rooms and books of animals being led two by two onto the ark.

In this biblical flood story, God basically "un-creates" the Eden-like world that God established in Creation in order to reestablish a new creation. But why?

***In this biblical flood story, God basically “un-creates” the Eden-like world that God established in Creation in order to reestablish a new creation.***

Prior to the story of Noah, we discover that humanity, which God created in God's own image and declared “good,” had become corrupt. Scripture tells us that God “saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth,” that it was filled with violence and corruption. There “was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Genesis 6:5-6).

Notice that this Scripture doesn't say that God seeks vengeance or is wrathful in response to what has happened. God surveys what has become of God's beautiful creation and of those who were tenderly entrusted with its care and is grieved to the heart.

That grief began with the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden after they ate from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The intimacy and trust that had been inherent from the beginning were broken. Humanity began hiding from God, and then blaming one another, and even God, for their own transgressions. While the creation of humanity and the instructions God offers them (the boundaries put in place for their good) is not called or considered a covenant, faith and trust are broken. It's grievous.

And that grief continues as the first child born to Adam and Eve, Cain, murders his brother Abel. Even so, God still provides for Adam and Eve and offers a means of protection for Cain in the midst of his banishment (Genesis 3:21; 4). As an aside, perhaps it's worth pausing for a moment to reflect that the first murderer does not receive a capital sentence from God; instead, God's mark warns other humans not to impose such a punishment. As creation

multiplies, it seems the growth of civilization only contributes to it becoming less civilized. Its actions are more and more inclined toward evil.

God is devastated by grief as the image of the loving and gracious Creator becomes unrecognizable in the ones who have been created. So God decides to “undo” creation. But instead of putting an end to it all, God decides to preserve a remnant of what God had created and start anew with the only person God finds to be righteous and blameless, the only one that “walked with God” (Genesis 6:9): Noah and his family. To begin this undoing of creation God determines to send a torrent of rain, a flood that will wash away all of the evil from the world and make way for a renewed creation.

Sometimes the image of God in us seems less visible to others than it should. We wander away from God and become less patient, less kind, less giving, less forgiving, less loving. In that wandering, we sometimes become more demanding, more irritable, more selfish, and more judgmental. We need to be re-created. We need to have God wash away that which makes our true identity as a child of God unrecognizable. We need to die to that which does not look like the love of the Creator in us.

In the ancient Near East, turbulent water was the symbol of ultimate chaos. A flood was viewed as a return to the primordial chaos from which God created the world. What is surprising about the story of Noah is not that God grieved over humanity and decided to eradicate it, but that the very people who were called into being out of the chaos and nothingness in creation, and were imbued with the very breath of God, seem determined to return to chaos and nothingness.

This wasn't just the case in Noah's day. We only have to turn on the television news or open our news apps to see story upon story of violence, corruption, greed, moral degeneration, and environmental abuses to realize that we, too, often choose turbulence and primordial chaos over the Eden-like existence that

God desires for us. Our all-too-human behaviors bring about real self-inflicted consequences. Our overt insistence on blaming the other person, the other political party, the other social class, or the other religious group for all of our personal and societal problems has resulted in a stark increase in vitriol toward our neighbors.

Our refusal to listen to others' points of view leads us no longer to see them as our brothers and sisters in creation, as children of God with whom we share this small planet that our Creator made. Our refusal to curb our appetites for consuming fossil fuels and refrain from littering our planet has contributed to rising sea levels, which can eerily remind us of the rising waters in Noah's day—this time caused by humans. Selfishness and violence have, as in Noah's time, contributed to fearfulness and suspicion in our communities instead of empathy and sharing.

It is easy to see the story of Noah, as many people do, as the act of a vengeful or capricious God. But that is not what is happening here. It's important to note that many of the ancient Near Eastern cultures had a flood story. Obviously, there was a massive flood (or floods) that affected the region, but each culture had its own story of what caused the flood. The most famous is the Epic of Gilgamesh.

***The God of Israel created and governed the world with a benevolent purpose.***

All of the other stories, except for the Old Testament interpretation of this natural disaster, marked the event as the work of capricious and uncaring deities, who made erratic and arbitrary decisions regarding the fate of humanity. However, Israel grounded this story in the God who cared deeply for all of creation and had expectations for righteousness and justice as part of the created order. The God of Israel created and governed the world with a benevolent purpose.



## Remember

There is ample evidence for the judgment and justice that God pronounces through the Flood story. But it also isn't surprising that God relents from destroying everyone and everything by saving righteous Noah and his family, and two of every animal, in order to begin creation again. While God is definitely just, Scripture constantly reminds us that God is also gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (Psalm 86:15; Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17). It is in God's very nature to create. It is also in God's nature to save and seek reconciliation with those who wander from the intention of their original design and blessedness. So, instead of destroying all of creation, God reboots it.

Before the rains come, God offers detailed instructions as to how Noah and his sons should build an ark to house their families and all of the animals when the waters begin to rise (Genesis 6:14-16). Just as God created birds of the air and every creeping thing on the earth, God provides for their reestablishment on the earth after the Flood in these words to Noah:

*"For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. . . . Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up, and it shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

(Genesis 6:17-19, 21-22)

Here we see the beginning of God establishing the first covenant in the Bible. While we don't yet read what it will entail, we do see that this covenant will be a divine response to the tension held between God's unrelenting purpose to create a peace-filled world and the Creator of the universe's character of justice,

colliding with God's deep love and compassion for a humanity that insists on bending toward violence, destruction, disobedience, and insubordination.

The church in which I served in ministry for 20 years—it is still my home church—is beautifully constructed in Gothic style. The sanctuary, like many churches, is architecturally designed in a cruciform shape. Its ceiling soars in height, seemingly carrying those who gather for worship into the presence of God. In such churches the center aisle is called the *nave*. The word *nave* is derived from the Latin, *navis*, meaning “ship.” I used to love reminding our congregation to look up at the ceiling in the nave of our church because it was intentionally designed to look like the hull of a ship. Every time we gather for worship we are symbolically reminded, not only of the story of Noah, but also of God's saving grace that continues to carry the community of faith—you and me—to safety through all of life's deluges, turbulent waters, and storms. We are to remember what God has done in the past, and continues doing, to save us, shelter us, and lead us to life. That beautiful symbolism was derived from and began with Noah, an ark, and a covenant. The symbol of the church is still a ship, an ark.

It's interesting to note that the only other place in the Old Testament where the Hebrew word for ark (*tebah*) is used is in the story of baby Moses, who is placed in a pitch-coated “basket” (*tebah*) that protects him and carries him to safety. Pharaoh had ordered all male Hebrew babies to be thrown in the Nile and drowned. But this tiny ark carried Moses safely through the same water meant for his destruction. The same God that provides an ark for Noah and his family provides one for Moses, too.

After forty days of deluge, “God remembered Noah” and all the animals with him. “And God made a wind blow over the earth” (Genesis 8:1). After 150 days of roiling water, and months of waiting for the waters to recede, a dove that Noah releases from the ark finally returns with an olive branch signaling that it's time

for the occupants of the ark to make their way into an empty world filled with new, hope-filled possibilities (Genesis 8:10-12).

God remembering Noah marks the turning point in the story. We learn here that God's memory is salvific, offering deeds of love that fulfill God's promises. For Noah, that promise is that he and his family will be integral in participating in God's new creation.

God's salvific remembering continues throughout the Bible. God remembers the childless Rachel, and she conceives and gives birth to Joseph (30:22-24). God hears the cries of the Israelites in Egypt, remembers the covenant made with Abraham, and delivers them from slavery (Exodus 2:23-25). The thief on the cross next to Jesus cries out to him, "Remember me when you come in your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). This was more than a throw-away request from a criminal; it was a declaration of faith in Jesus's identity as the One who can save through remembering the distress of God's people.

God remembers Noah and makes a wind blow over the earth, inviting us to remember the opening verses of the Creation story in Genesis: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1-2).

In Hebrew the word translated as "wind" is *ruach*. It can also mean "breath" or "spirit." In creation, God's breath or spirit hovered over the waters of creation. That same breath and spirit breathe life into a lump of clay, causing it to become a human being made in the image of its Creator. That same wind, breath, and spirit will be active in this new creation, calming the waters and bringing new life. Keep all this in mind, by the way, whenever you read the story in John's Gospel of how the risen Jesus breathed onto the disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). God's Spirit gave life to Adam and Eve, gave new life and power to the disciples, and, here, renews the world God made.

As the wind from God dries the earth, and as Noah and his family wait and yearn for new possibilities, we get a sense that God's grief continues. God realizes that retribution will not resolve humanity's constant bent toward chaos and destruction, so God makes binding promises to Noah and his family. This covenant actually extends to all humanity, all living creatures, and all creation.

As we've learned, some covenants require both parties to make an agreement, and if the covenant terms are not met, the covenant becomes void. What is amazing about this covenant that God makes with all of creation—with Noah, with you, and with me—is that it requires *nothing* from us. It is unilateral. God is the sole actor in this covenant made with creation. It sets limits only on God, who promises never again to destroy all of creation by a flood.

God self-imposes limits on God's power. And God places the rainbow in the sky as a kind of divine memory aid. Nothing is required of Noah and his family or of their descendants to prevent this destruction from recurring. Only God is responsible for keeping this covenant, and the sign of the covenant (if there's a covenant, there is usually a sign) will be the rainbow. Whenever it appears in the clouds, the rainbow will remind God of the covenant made with Noah and all of creation. Not that God has a poor memory and needs the reminder, but knowing about the sign of the covenant also reminds us that God prefers to bind God's self to us, regardless of how chaotic, violent, or destructive we become, rather than not live with us. It reminds us of our undeserved blessings and God's abundant compassion.

Just as God expresses sorrow in creating humanity and decides to begin creation anew, I believe God's initiating of the covenant with Noah expresses God's grief over the original creation that God loved. Why? Because God promises never again to do such a thing. Many have thought that the covenant given to Noah was a sign of God's repentance, or turning back toward humanity, even as God knows that this new creation, beginning with Noah's

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children and extending through their descendants, will not be as faithful and righteous as Noah. God would rather live with us, despite our disregard for God's purposes in our lives, than live without us. We can remember this and give thanks every time we see a rainbow.

One summer afternoon, as we were vacationing in Colorado, storms blew in over the Rockies, as they often do at that time of day. Just as the rain subsided, a magnificent rainbow appeared in the sky. It was the largest I had ever seen, with the most vibrant colors. It was so huge that it seemed as if you could almost reach out and touch it. The expansive bands were broad and as vivid as if a painter had freshly dipped his largest brush into each vibrant color on his palette. I grabbed my camera to capture the breathtaking moment. Though the images from the photos were impressive, they paled in comparison to the splendor of the reality.

And then I thought about Noah. I thought about how breathtaking it must have been for him to hear God's voice proclaim the depth of God's love for him, his family, and all of creation. I thought about how powerful and palpable that love must have felt. No doubt, the magnificence of the moment when Noah saw the first rainbow after God proclaimed the covenant with all of creation must have mirrored, or even amplified, the awe he felt at hearing about the covenant from God.

***The rainbow was, and is, always there  
as a reminder that God remembers.***

And yet, even the story of the covenant, as it was told and read through the years, couldn't capture the magnificence of that first moment of awe, just as my camera couldn't capture the full beauty of my rainbow sighting or instill the wonder I experienced from witnessing it directly. People's memories faded like images in old photographs until humanity turned their eyes, not toward the

# Remember the God who remembers us.

Susan Robb's *Remember: God's Covenants and the Cross* is a rich Lenten read. I could not put it down. She masterfully tells the story of God's covenants in the Hebrew Bible, then helps the reader connect the dots between these stories, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. A meaningful Lenten study.

**Adam Hamilton**, pastor and author of *Luke: Jesus and the Outsiders, Outcasts, and Outlaws*

Remembering God's covenant with people of faith emphasizes God's continuing relationship and love for all of humanity. The intersection between the biblical stories and covenants with our everyday lives opens new thoughts for our Lenten journeys. Rev. Susan Robb's book, *Remember: God's Covenants and the Cross*, has revealed a new path in a deeper understanding of salvation history and the New Covenant with Jesus.

**Bishop Michael McKee**, Dean *ad interim*, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

The covenants mark the perfect starting point for a Lenten study, and here Susan Robb has woven them together with the story of Christ's suffering and death—a new covenant—in a way that teaches and invigorates. *Remember* gracefully brings the story of God's covenants into all our lives of faith.

**Rachel Billups**, Senior Pastor, New Albany United Methodist Church, New Albany, Ohio, and author of *Be Bold: Finding Your Fierce*

Once again, Susan Robb gifts us with a thoughtful and thorough exploration of God's eternal love, this time through the lens and language of covenant. This study, designed for Lent, is appropriate for any of us—all of us—in the holy pursuit, as she says so beautifully, of remembering the God who remembers us.

**Rebecca Bruff**, author of *Trouble the Water, Loving the World with God, and Stars of Wonder*

*Remember: God's Covenant and the Cross* examines four foundational covenants between God and God's people through the lens of the Lenten season of personal preparation for the ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. You don't need to wait for Lent to have this book touch your heart and draw you closer to God's unwavering love.

**Joe Park**, CEO and Principal, Horizons Stewardship



**Susan Robb** recently retired as the Senior Associate Minister at Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, where she was part of the church staff for twenty years. God's call to ministry led her to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. She graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2006 with an award in Homiletics. Susan's area of expertise lies in writing and teaching Bible studies and exploring the idea of listening to and responding to God's call. She is married to Ike, and they have two children, Caroline and James.

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