**18th February 2024**

**Call to worship**

Rainbows delight and surprise us.
Our breath pausing, we stand under the beauty
of the creator’s promise of unfailing love.
Colours of joy beaming onto us,
recalling us to remember, to turn,
to believe the good news.

**A gathering prayer**

God of beautiful rainbows,
mirroring the myriad colours of your marvellous creation,
we are drawn together in the dance of your unfailing love.
Thank you for attracting us with your beauty and goodness.
Inspire us to treasure each day as a fresh start,
in our shared life in you. **Amen**.

**A prayer of approach**

Eternal God,
your love draws us in and your promises fill us with hope;
your covenant secures our future and undergirds our faith;
your grace enriches and colours our relationships and our lives.
And so, on this new day, we join our voices to sing your praises.
We open our hearts to hear your word
and celebrate all that you have done for us and for all creation.
In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

God of truth,
we praise you for your covenant with us and all creation and
for all the colours of your blessings:
for the reds and yellows of your unconditional and costly love;
for the pinks and greens of your creativity and compassion;
for the oranges and purples of your grace and understanding;
and for the blue of your faithfulness.
In wonder and joy we praise you.**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

*Response after each phrase*:
**Forgive us and help us to make a fresh start.**

God of all,
when we abuse your covenant with us and are complacent:
when we trash your creation ruthlessly and selfishly:
when we reject your call to live well and generously:
when we take your love for granted:
In Jesus’ name we pray. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Faithful God, you raise us up from the ashes of sin and repentance to the joy of forgiveness and acceptance; you flood our hearts with your love, your grace and your beauty; you give us the opportunity to make a fresh start and to seek out that which is lifegiving and creative and fulfilling; you journey with us through the storms and the failures and equip us to stand firm and to flourish. Thank you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise**

*Response after each phrase*: **We praise you.**

Living God, with the crescent moon and the rising sun:
with the singing birds and the roaring waves:
with your creatures in the forests and the creatures in the fields:
with our friends and family around our tables and our brothers and sisters around our world:
for your promises, your love and your faithfulness:
**Amen.**

**Feel the love**

A way to express God’s universal and unconditional love.

You will need: A5 paper, scissors, pencils.

* In advance, prepare a large rainbow painted on wallpaper, with one or more red card hearts attached near its centre.
* Display the rainbow. Ask everyone to line up in pairs. Give every pair a number: one, two or three. Ones are people. Twos are tame animals. Threes are wild creatures. Explain that, after the flood: God promised to love everyone – all people alive then and their children’s children, and so on for ever; God promised to love all living things – tame and wild, across all the earth, then and for ever into the future; and God promised this love, no matter what – in good times and bad times.
* Take the heart(s) from the rainbow and pass it/(them) to someone, saying ‘I am [your name, or a country/people that a person might be from, or the name of an animal – as appropriate]. God loves me; and God loves you. Pass it on.’ That person should then do the same, until everyone has received it. The last person returns the heart to the rainbow. Remind everyone that the rainbow is a sign/reminder that God’s love will be there for every generation to come.

**Genesis 9.8-17**

**Sermon**

**Introduction**

Valentines Day was on Wednesday, which this year coincided with Ash Wednesday the start of Lent.

I watched a love story with a difference on Tuesday night, namely the story of Stephen and Jane Hawkings relationship in the film Theory of Everything on BBC I-Player. Steven Hawking was a remarkable scientist. What was arguably more remarkable was the care and love of the woman who married him and literally kept him alive, after only being given two years to live when he was diagnosed with motor neurone disease whilst he was at Cambridge University. Certainly, as the film shows, Jane Hawking went into their marriage knowing the worst was almost certainly around the corner. You say your marriage promises, for better or for worse but the test is when it gets worse.

Interviewed in the Observer many years ago[[1]](#endnote-1) she said: 'Yes, but at that stage I did not want to think about that. Also, we had this very strong sense at the time that our generation lived anyway under this most awful nuclear cloud - that with a four-minute warning the world itself could likely end. That made us feel above all that we had to do our bit, that we had to follow an idealistic course in life. That may seem naive now, but that was exactly the spirit in which Stephen and I set out in the Sixties - to make the most of whatever gifts were given us.'

Jane took much of her dramatic hope at the time from her faith, and still sees something of the irony in the fact that her Christianity gave her the strength to support her husband, the most profound atheist. 'Stephen, I hope, had belief in me that I could make everything possible for him, but he did not share my religious - or spiritual - faith.'

The story of Stephen Hawking's survival in those years, and his triumphant inquiry into the origins of the universe, was, in many ways, as she recalls it, the result of a spectacular fission of their opposed philosophies. 'Stephen's belief was that if you were free to do your absolute best work you would be rewarded. My belief was that if you gave all of yourself, to what you believed was right, then that would be enough.'

Their commitment, their covenant of marriage, was severely tested but endured for over twenty years until Stephen left Jane for his nurse.

Life can have its frustrations at times! We can be caught up in a storm, overwhelmed by things to do, demands on us, relationship difficulties that it can seem as though we are drowning in a state of chaos.

We wonder where God is in all that. God has made promises to us. God promises to be there. That can make all the difference.

There is a long tradition of making the Season of Lent a special time for reflection, especially personal reflec­tions on one’s faith journey. This year during the Sunday morning worship in Lent we will be immersing ourselves in God’s promises of presence, love, and guidance through the various covenants in scripture – I hope you enjoy the journey.

**Covenants are different to contracts.[[2]](#endnote-2)**
A contract is a rather modern legal construct. It is a legally binding agreement to do or not do something. It often includes penalties for a breach of contract. If the contract is breached and penalties are paid, then the payment is considered to be adequate compensation for the breach of contract. There is not necessarily any moral failing involved in the breach.

A covenant is an ancient construct wherein two parties promise to do something or not do something. Because of the fallen nature of humanity, the covenant may include penalties for breaking the covenant, but, unlike a contract, it is considered immoral to break a covenant—it is a betrayal of trust. There is never a sense in which it is morally upright for a person to break a covenant, even if the covenant-breaker is willing to pay the penalties.

The difference between a contract and a covenant can be illustrated in current attitudes about marriage. Some people approach marriage as a contract between two parties. They both willingly enter into the marriage contract, and, later, if one or both of them want to exit the relationship, they simply negotiate the payments and penalties (splitting property and money, custody agreement for kids, etc.) and move on without any moral stigma. Some couples go into marriage with a prenuptial agreement that outlines, before the couple is even married, how the payments and property will be split in a divorce.

Biblically speaking, [marriage](https://www.gotquestions.org/questions_marriage.html) is not a contract but a covenant between two people with God and the rest of the community as witnesses. One should not enter marriage with an eye to what will happen if or, in the case of some couples, when the marriage is dissolved. Marriage is meant to be for life, for better or for worse as you make your promises, and there is always a moral component and a moral failing, by one or both parties, when a marriage fails.

Yet we also believe in the God of second chances, third chances – the God who forgives our failures.

God is a covenant-keeping God. A God of faithfulness. A God of His word. Even if we aren’t.

**Covenant Theology**

In classic theological constructions, the ark story is the second of four covenants with God. The first is the covenant with Adam and Eve: They would have dominion over the works of God's creation. The second is with Noah: God would not destroy the earth with water again. The third is with Abraham (we will look at that next week): God would guarantee that Abraham's descendants would survive and prevail. The fourth is with Moses: (that’s in two weeks’ time) God gave to Israel a sacred charter to guide them.

There is also the Palestinian Covenant which is about God’s promises of land to God’s people, [Deuteronomy 30:1-10](https://www.bibleref.com/Deuteronomy/30/Deuteronomy-30-1.html), and also the Davidic Covenant [2 Samuel 7:8-16](https://www.bibleref.com/2-Samuel/7/2-Samuel-7-8.html), which is God’s promises to David for an everlasting kingdom.

God then had his prophet Jeremiah promise a new covenant (31:31). God would forgive sin and have a close, unbroken relationship with His people through changed hearts.
Finally God in Christ said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” when he instituted the Lord’s Supper in the Upper Room (1 Cor. 11:25).

Covenant theology is a branch of theological study that examines the Bible within the context of the Bible's covenants. So, Covenants give a structure for understanding the biblical story. The Reformers especially saw the Old Testament covenants as covenants of works and the new testament as a covenant of grace. A third covenant, the covenant of redemption, is also frequently emphasized.

Simply explained, it begins with the covenant of works that began in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were given one command, with a clear consequence for disobedience.

When Adam and Eve failed to keep God's commandment, God established the covenant of grace. This covenant of grace is seen clearly in Jesus Christ, with salvation offered as a free gift of grace by faith ([Ephesians 2:8-9](https://www.bibleref.com/Ephesians/2/Ephesians-2-8.html)).

Other covenants are similarly broken by humans yet kept by God's grace. Abraham failed God at times, yet God's grace was sufficient. The Davidic Covenant was fulfilled despite David's sins.

In the New Covenant, Jesus fulfills the law and offers salvation to those who turn to Him. He does not fail as other humans had but fulfills the covenant both as a human and as God. All the earlier covenants find fulfillment in Jesus, who claims not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it ([Matthew 5:17](https://www.bibleref.com/Matthew/5/Matthew-5-17.html)).

All of that we will unfold over these next five weeks.

**There are/were different types of covenant’s or promises.**

One form was the Royal Grant – which was an unconditional promise from a sovereign to a subject.

Another type of covenant was that of parity between equals.

The other type of covenant was a suzerain vassal covenant which regulated the relationship between a sovereign and their subjects. This was conditional – it depended on both sides fulfilling their side of the deal. Both sides made promises.

The covenant made to Noah was a royal grant type of covenant – God’s promise to Noah and by implication to the whole of creation, was unconditional. Let’s have a look at the story.

**Noahic Covenant**

The Story of Noah of course is a children's favourite and a best seller in children’s books and toys. The actual story is anything but a children story.

This story and the influence of her six year old daughter were significant in my wife’s hairdresser coming to faith many years ago. As she was doing Debbie’s hair in our kitchen she got talking about how her daughter had been looking at the story of Noah’s Ark at school and had been asking her some hard questions – like why did God send a flood?

Do you believe in God?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I think there is someone there’ came the reply. ‘But if God sends a flood and kills everyone he can’t be that nice’.

I said in reply, ‘For me the story of Noah’s Ark is how, if there is a good God, how does God deal with evil? Many ancient cultures had myths and legends about floods and how they were signs that the gods were displeased with humanity and decided to make a clean start. This was the ancient view and interpretation of what we would call natural disasters.

Don’t get hung up on whether there was a man called Noah who built an ark and whether there was a flood that destroyed the earth. The point of the story is the Bible works out its understanding of what God is like throughout the bible. Some theologians call it progressive revelation. In the early stages humanity fumbled around in the dark not knowing much about God. For Christians., a vital aspect of our belief is that we believe God came in the flesh – as one of us, as Jesus – to clear up any misunderstanding of how God would react and whether God is for us or against us.

So, when Jesus, in his pursuit of justice and freedom and salvation for all, met with opposition and was crucified, he didn’t resort to force and violence, he didn’t call down God’s wrath from on high, but he offered forgiveness and a love that evil, sin and death couldn’t conquer. He overcame evil with good. His love casts out fear; his life showed the way through evil and death.’

Our hairdresser wanted to know more about Jesus – she took a gospel and started to attend a church near where she lived in Minchinhampton and went on an alpha course and came to faith.

For me the story of Noah’s Ark and the rainbow is the start of God’s rescue plan for humanity. A creation that has gone wrong through human sin and rebellion is started again. The flood makes a clean sweep but then God changes his mind and says never again will I bring destruction on the world.

In this passage we see God taking the divine initiative to establish a covenant with Noah, his descendants “and with every living creature” (v. 10).

Basically, a covenant is an agreement between two parties. In the case of covenants with God, God is the superior party and takes the initiative to establish the agreement. God made a covenant with Noah, not the other way around.

God promised Noah that “never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (v. 11). God initiates our salvation and covenant relationship with him. We do not find God—God finds, calls, and saves us. We are saved by divine grace, not by our human initiative.

The rainbow became a sign of that covenant. The rainbow has a place in legend owing to its beauty and the historical difficulty in explaining the phenomenon.

In [Greco-Roman mythology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Roman_mythology), the rainbow was considered to be a path made by a messenger ([Iris](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iris_%28mythology%29)) between Earth and Heaven.

In [Chinese mythology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_mythology), the rainbow was a slit in the sky sealed by goddess [Nüwa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%BCwa) using stones of five different colours.

Ancient people thought the rainbow was God’s weapon from which his lightning arrows were shot. (See Ps. 7:12-13.) The rainbow in the sky after a storm was a fearful sight—a symbol of fiery destruction.

God made the rainbow a symbol not of destruction but of deliverance. It was to be a reminder of his gracious covenant with Noah and with us. The rainbow reminds us of divine mercy: “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” (v. 16).

In the film [*The Wizard of Oz*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wizard_of_Oz_%281939_film%29), lead character [Dorothy Gale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Gale) sings the song "[Over the Rainbow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Over_the_Rainbow)" where she fantasises about a place over the rainbow, where the world is in peace and harmony

Rainbow flags tend to be used as a sign of a new era, of hope, or of social change. Rainbow flags have been used in many places over the centuries: in the [German Peasants' War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Peasants%27_War) in the 16th century, as a symbol of the [Cooperative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative) movement; as a symbol of [gay pride](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_pride), inclusion and diversity. As a symbol of a multi-racial nation – remember Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela describing South Africa as the Rainbow nation.

Richard Rohr, [*Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*](https://shop.franciscanmedia.org/products/things-hidden-scripture-as-spirituality-2) said ‘The rainbow is a symbol representing diversity and inter-connectedness. God tells Noah to bring into the ark all the opposites: the wild and the domestic (Genesis 7:2-15) and locks them together inside. ‘It is “holding” things unreconciled that teaches us – leaving them partly unresolved. Sometimes we claw ourselves to death. But gathering contraries is the school of love. It happens, in honest community and committed relationships [covenant relationships]. In forgiveness [a fresh start] you experience three graces: God’s unmerited goodness, the deeper goodness of the one you have forgiven, and your own gratuitous goodness.’

The biblical view is to see the rainbow as a sign of God’s promise not to destroy but to deliver. Not to harm but to heal, not to kill but to save, not to hate but to love.

The rescue of Noah’s family from the flood was an act of divine grace. God saved a family and the ark became a symbol of divine mercy and salvation. Why the central area of a church is called a nave – it mirrors the ship, the ark, that carries people to salvation.

The early church did not initially use the cross as a symbol of their faith. The humiliation of Jesus public execution was too fresh in their memories. Instead, early Christian art often depicted the ark. It stood for the church and salvation for those within it, by faith. By the ark God gave the human race a second chance, even as the gospel gives us the opportunity for redemption.

As Lent begins, let the rainbow and Noah’s ark symbolize our gracious God and God’s covenant promises.

Some people think they cannot come to God. One man committed sins in the past for which he was sure God would never forgive him. He had been involved with some atrocities in wartime. He couldn’t even tell me what he had done – just said it haunted him for the rest of his life. I can see how such people, who are having trouble forgiving themselves, could wonder if God could ever forgive them.

Another person was an older man who was dying. All his life he had rejected God’s will for his life. Toward the end of his life, I offered him God’s gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. He refused, saying it just would not be right to wait until the end to get the gift. He didn’t deserve it.

As logical as what these people said appears, look at what Jesus did in order to bring people just like them to God.

If we could grade sins on a scale of 1 to 10, could we then say Christ died for sins that rank 7 or less, but not 8 or more? Murderers, rapists, and such would not be included? Only those with lesser sins, such as lying or stealing, could be forgiven?

The Bible knows no such grading. Jesus says that to look at another person with lust in your eye is no different than committing adultery. Calling a person a fool is as sinful as killing them. All sins rank 10. Thus, if the murderer cannot be drawn to God, neither can the liar.

Through what Jesus did on the cross—through his sacrifice and death—he has overcome the power of sin: any sin. Nothing stands between us and God because Jesus has bridged the gap.

Whatever holds you captive, Jesus Christ is ready to loose the bonds and free you to experience new life.

This is the God who did not give up on his project humanity.

God has placed a rainbow in our sky as a sign that floods would never again cover the whole earth. The rainbow is a bridge over troubled waters. The rainbow of the Old Testament has become the bridge of the New Testament. Jesus is indeed the bridge over the troubled waters of our lives.

Scientifically, as Stephen Hawking would tell you, Rainbows are caused by light travelling through water droplets. The light bends and bounces through the droplet, separating out into its different wavelengths, each a different colour, producing a rainbow of colours ordered according to the wavelength.

But we don’t need to understand how a rainbow works in order to appreciate its beauty, just as we don’t need to understand how or why God provides us with fresh starts in order to be grateful and make use of them. Whether it is a fresh start after a failed marriage, a fresh start after some wrong we have committed, a fresh start after some failure at work or business or in ur personal life.

And, again without needing to know how, we can see that the light interacting with the droplets transforms them. Perhaps our fresh starts, too, come when we are transformed by the Light of the World.

May God flood your life with grace and mercy. May you know the rainbow of hope, God’s covenant of love over you.

**Prayers of intercession**

**God’s good news of a covenant**

Leader: Turn around, repent and rejoice in the covenant with God.
**All: Lord, help us to make a fresh start with one another and you.**

Lord God, we come to you today aware of the wonders of your creation beginning to sprout all around us. We pause for a moment to think of (*and perhaps name out loud*) some of the signs of God’s creation we have seen around us this week….

And we come to you aware that we fall far short of the people you originally created us to be. We pause again to breathe out our shortcomings and breathe in your forgiveness.

Leader: Turn around, repent and rejoice in the covenant with God.
**All: Lord, help us to make a fresh start with one another and you.**

Lord, we thank you for the beauty of your world whilst acknowledging all that we do to spoil its beauty. We think of times this week when we have seen your world spoiled by the selfishness of others, in the litter dumped in our hedgerows, plastics polluting our rivers and streams, sewage pouring into our seas…

Remind us of times when we have failed to be good stewards of your world this week…
perhaps when we couldn’t be bothered to recycle our waste, when we have bought more than we needed, when we’ve driven the car when we could easily have walked… Forgive us for our part, Lord.

Leader: Turn around, repent and rejoice in the covenant with God.
**All: Lord, help us to make a fresh start with one another and you.**

Lord God, we bring our hurting world to you. Gaza and Israel remain in the headlines as we see such suffering on our TV screens. We remember the people of Ukraine, as well as many other war-torn parts of the world that never make it to the headlines. But you see the hatred and the fear…

We pray for those in our communities who are struggling to live in peace, remembering families where there is breakdown and mistrust; young people bullied at school; the abuse that happens behind closed doors that may be known only to you.

Lord, give us wisdom, as your covenant people, to know how and where to step in and help. Give us the courage to be peacemakers in our homes, our schools, our places of work.

Leader: Turn around, repent and rejoice in the covenant with God.
**All: Lord, help us to make a fresh start with one another and you.**

Lord God, be close to those who need a reminder of your unfailing covenant love this week. We pray for those who are sick; those who are awaiting diagnoses; those who have been given bad news.

We remember those who are struggling with their mental health or dementia. And we pray for those who are dying. We pray for those who care for them. Our prayers have especially been asked for…

We remember those among us who are sad, sorrowing, afraid, lonely or hurting in ways known to others or only to you. We pray by name for… Wrap your comforting arms around them, we pray. Help us to be bearers of your covenant love to those who need so much to hear a kind word or feel a touch of empathy.

Leader: Turn around, repent and rejoice in the covenant with God.
**All: Lord, help us to make a fresh start with one another and you.**

Lord God, we thank you that you chose to make a covenant with us - that you chose to be part of our lives. Show us how to walk more closely with you as your covenant people. Teach us how to bring your covenant love into our everyday situations. We picture in our minds our homes and families, our daily routine, those who visit us:
in the silence of this moment, give us a vision of how we can make a difference this week.

Now we move our thoughts to our school, or place of work, or places we regularly attend. Help us to be more attuned to your presence with us this week. Go before us, leading the way, so that we don’t stray from your paths. Help us to reflect your love. Remind us of the need to be kind, even when others are not kind to us. Let the rainbow light of your love shine out through us to all those we come into contact with this week.

As we leave this place today, let us:

Leader: Turn around, repent and rejoice in the covenant with God.
**All: Lord, help us to make a fresh start with one another and you.**

**Amen**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Loving God,
hearing about your love for us makes us feel safe.
You don’t ask impossible things of us.
When we mess up, you give us a fresh start.
Thank you.
We see signs of your love all around:
in friends, in the things we have, in rainbows.
May your love flow through us
to the whole of your beautiful creation. **Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

God of new beginnings,
your undying, tender love is truly amazing.
You sustain the whole universe with what is needed for life.
You trust us humans to care for that life.
We often fail,
but your love reaches out a hand to pick us up,
to help us start again.
Thank you. **Amen.**

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2004/apr/04/features.review17> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gotquestions.org/difference-covenant-contract.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)