

Sermon "A Sign of the Covenant
Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15
Sunday, February 18, 2018
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Our scripture reading, Genesis 9:8-17, records the first in a series of covenants between God and creation. The flood story is a part of the pre-patriarchal narrative in Genesis 1-11. Chapter 12 begins the Hebrew history with the covenant between God and Abram. The first 11 chapters of Genesis, beginning with creation and concluding with the Tower of Babel, give an account of the origin and spread of human sin ---as well as a glimpse into the heart of the Hebrew God, Yahweh.

As with the creation story, the flood story is not unique to the Hebrew scripture. Parallel stories are found in Babylonian sources. The differences are found in the role and character of Yahweh. The Hebrew flood story highlights the second chance humanity receives because of the benevolence of God and the relationship between God and Noah. Rather than understand God as hostile, the ancient Hebrew scripture portrays God as loving and God's covenant as unconditional. Listen to the word of God.

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ 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.^[a] ¹¹ 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.' ¹⁷ 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.' Amen.

Several hundred years after the rainbow reference, as God's faithfulness continues to unfold in the coming of Christ, Mark introduces his gospel not with Christ's birth, but with his baptism "coming up out of the water" and temptation "forty days fasting in the wilderness." On this first Sunday of Lent, our second Scripture reading is Mark 1:9-15. The forty days of lent commemorate the 40 days Christ spent fasting and praying, preparing for his ministry. Hear now God's Holy Word.

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved;^[a] with you I am well pleased. ¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news^[b] of God,^[c] ¹⁵ and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;^[d] repent, and believe in the good news. Amen.

The title of the sermon “A Sign of the Covenant”

The Text: “I will set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” Genesis 9:13

Let us pray. We give you thanks, Holy and loving God, for the covenants and signs along our faith journeys which remind us of who you are and who you call us to be. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It was a summer day I remember well. I received a call from a couple whom I had married a few years earlier. Although they were not members, I recalled their love story which was especially heart-warming. Her second marriage, his first, they met serendipitously, were delightfully compatible and especially grateful for the love they found in one another.

Being able to share in the joy of God’s children and to participate in their “covenants of love” is one of the privileges of ministry. What they shared with me that summer was that they were quite happy, however some rain had fallen in their lives. His mother had died and would I officiate at her funeral.

Three years earlier I had shared in their joy and now they were asking me to enter with them into their sorrow. We spent some time together and I listened to them talk affectionately about a woman who devoted her life to her husband, their four sons, and the land they respected and farmed together over the years. Meeting her through their eyes, I was able to pay tribute to this woman’s life during the service and then I had the privilege, as your pastor, to bring God’s words of comfort and strength to those gathered to honor her life.

Following the benediction on this warm, sunny summer afternoon, the people remained around the graveside for a few moments greeting one another when suddenly the sky turned black and it began to pour a torrential rain. As we hurried to our cars I couldn’t help but think that the rain was symbolic of God’s tears and God’s willingness to enter into our sorrow.

As quickly as the rain began, the rain stopped and the sun returned. I looked back and there in the sky arched across this countryside cemetery was one of the most vibrant rainbows I have ever seen.

As we drove away, with the bow across the sky, the driver from the funeral home made a comment about my connection with the “Big Guy” upstairs to get a rainbow like that following the graveside service. We laughed together but underneath the nervous laughter I think we both felt a sense of awe...not in my connectational system but in the beauty of this natural phenomenon in God’s world and in the timing of this particular rainbow as the sign of the covenant.

I don’t anticipate that this will ever happen quite the same way in my lifetime. I don’t attribute any special blessing upon this woman that is unique from the rest of us. In fact, I thought it was even more poignant that she was not a particularly religious person from the church’s

perspective, however she was one whose life was dependent upon the rains and she was one who had a deep respect and appreciation for the land; the land which was included in this first covenant – *“I will set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”*

The rainbow is the reminder of God’s goodness toward God’s creation. The bow that God set in the clouds following forty days of rain was intended to be “a reminder” for God who said to Noah “I will see it and I will remember the everlasting covenant.” The bow in the sky which we have come to associate with the rainbow originally referred to the bow of an arrow. God placed the bow in the sky as a covenant not to use it to destroy God’s creation. God will not abandon the world or the people God has created.

The rainbow is a sign of hope and there are times in our personal lives and in the history of our civilization when there is great need for a rainbow. Overshadowed by dark memories or paralyzed by tragedy we sometimes can see nothing but the difficulties. Belief in what lies beyond the barrier of the difficulty is the rainbow. In this powerful story of old, Noah did not make the rainbow, God put it there. Our hope is in the God whom we trust. God’s eternal goodness will not fail us and goes beyond human barriers and difficulties.

The rainbow is the sign of the first unconditional covenant between God and God’s creation and the beginning of our understanding of a loving God. However, the God who will not destroy the earth is a long way from the God of Calvary who embraces our humanity and enters into our suffering to make us whole. Our understanding about the nature of God as revealed in the writings of Holy Scripture evolved with new covenants and new experiences. So we find growth in our understanding of who God is. Each time we are more surprised than the time before ...that God’s eternal goodness is in God’s undying love...that God goes beyond human barriers and difficulties by entering into them.

The 40 days Christ spent alone in the wilderness “tempted by Satan” and surrounded by wild beasts prepared him for a life of passion and sacrifice. When we commemorate Christ’s humanity in the wilderness experience during lent, we cannot help but be reminded of our own, our mortality and our vulnerability.

Lent is also a time to remember that sacrifice is a part of any true passion. We cannot love in this life without a cost. Lent is traditionally a time when Christians make sacrifices in honor of the sacrifice made by Christ. The sacrifices he endured in his life and death, a sign of the new covenant between God and humankind...the God who placed the bow in the sky.

This Ash Wednesday we were reminded of how vulnerable we really are in another tragic and senseless school shooting. Sadly, the gun debate continues in our country and let me say how impressed I am of the articulate voices of these young people asking adults and those who lead our country to protect them and to make some sacrifices by passing common sense gun laws and limiting access to semi-automatic and automatic guns. ...taking the lead from the God who placed the bow in the sky...the God who joined us in our humanity, and the God who conquered death by dying on a cross.

As we begin our journey toward Holy Week this Lent, let us find strength in the words of poet Annie Johnson Flint who lived at the turn of the 20th century:

God hath not promised skies always blue
Flower strewn pathways all our lives through.
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
Yet God has promised strength for the days,
Rest for the labor, light for the way
Grace for the trials help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.

I will set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant. Amen.