

Sermon – Covenant of Colors
Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15
Sunday, February 21, 2021
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Our first 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 God's Holy Word.

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. 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.

The God who gave us the rainbow in Genesis is the God who embraced our humanity and journeyed to the cross in Christ Jesus. Several hundred years after the story of the rainbow, God's covenants continue to color our world 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 with the affirmation of Christ's humanity "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, 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 of God, ¹⁵ and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. Amen.

The title of the sermon “Covenant of Colors”

The Text: 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. Genesis 9:16

Let us pray. We give you thanks, Holy and loving God, for the covenants that color our faith journeys and 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 one of those unforgettable moments colored with joy and wonder, hope and peace despite loss, a sense of transcendence and utter delight. I was in Colorado officiating at the wedding of a dear friend’s daughter. I had watched Emily grow up in the first Presbyterian church I served as an associate pastor and I had sojourned with this family as they traveled a via dolorosa of their own in the unexpected diagnosis, the vicissitudes of treatment, and the untimely death of Carol’s husband and Emily’s father.

In 1992 I led the memorial service to honor Bob’s life in a sanctuary overflowing with friends and family. He was beloved by the community and adored by his wife and three children who all knew Bob loved the rain. Growing up they would watch the rain together from their front porch.

Five years later I spoke at Emily’s older brother’s wedding in Chicago. and seven years after that marriage, here we were together again to share in the joy of Emily’s wedding. It was the summer of 2004 and there was much excitement about an outdoor ceremony on the top of a mountain at Steamboat Springs Ski Resort where Emily and her fiancée worked. The festivities leading up to the ceremony were colorful, filled with laughter, friendship, and joy. Guests and the wedding party arrived on the mountaintop by gondola lifts that Saturday afternoon.

During the service there was a sprinkle of rain through the sunshine which baptized all gathered for this Presbyterian ceremony. The rain arrived as I spoke about my affection and respect for the Rosenkranz Family in the generosity of their love, the strength of their faith, the give and take, the honor and respect they offered one another during the struggle of their father and husband Bob’s illness and death. I affirmed that although Bob was not physically present, the joy and memories of his presence were with us, and like our heavenly Father, nothing would give Bob greater joy than to celebrate his daughter’s wedding.

Moments later shortly after the marriage covenant was sealed with a kiss, a vibrant rainbow appeared across the horizon and we knew that Bob was with us in the continuum of colors that filled the sky. We realized we were at the place where joy and sorrow meet. With awe, gratitude. and wonder, we gave thanks to the covenant making God who gave us the rainbow and who reminded us in the gift of the rainbow on that summer day that nothing can separate us from the love of God and from those we love. What wondrous love is this!

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, a reminder that our covenant making God will not abandon us. 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 transforms human barriers and difficulties.

It is the raindrops which form the prism breaking the white light into all the colors of the spectrum making the rainbow possible. Indeed, joy is like the rain! It is out of our struggles, challenges, losses, and sorrows that we discover the vibrant hue and the variety of the many shades that color and give our lives meaning. We have the capacity to grow into beautiful, comprehensive, and inclusive human beings when we allow God's light to break forth in the prism of the raindrops that baptize each of our lives.

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, challenged by temptations to deny his humanity, colored his perspective and prepared him for a life of compassion and sacrifice. When we commemorate Christ's humanity in the wilderness experience during Lent, we are reminded of our own humanity, our mortality, the call to love all people across the spectrum, and the salvation of all creation through the gifts of the rainbow and our Savior.

Just as God embraced humanity in the life and ministry of Jesus, days after his birth the Christ child himself was embraced by the elder Simeon when Mary and Joseph fulfilled covenantal law with his dedication at the Temple.

In the ensuing Bach anthem, our soloist Logan Campbell will sing Simeon's grateful words: "I ask no more, in peace I depart. Mine eyes have beheld Christ and have seen Thy salvation, the Savior and hope of all Thy Creation." How poignant it was that at the end of his devoted and faithful life two years ago, our beloved elder Dr. Glen Pittman chose Simeon's words of hope and salvation for inclusion in his memorial service to convey the everlasting love of God.

As we enter into our own Lenten journeys, may we remember the covenantal love and colors of the rainbow, the hope of the Christ child, the temptations of the wilderness, the sorrow of the cross, and the joy of the resurrection. Amen