

SERMON: Our End of the Rainbow
TEXT: Genesis 9:8-17

2-21-21

Is there anyone in the world who doesn't enjoy the beauty of a rainbow after a storm? Even as adults, when we see a rainbow, we want to make sure that others see it, too. "Look, a rainbow!" "Did you see the rainbow?" We used to have to run inside for the camera to get a photo before it faded. Of course, now we just reach into our pockets if we don't already have our smart phone - complete with camera - in our hand.

Part of my own fascination with rainbows came from *The Wizard of Oz*, a favorite movie of mine growing up. Every year when it came on television, it was a big event. My sister and I would put our pajamas on and gather around the TV, with a bowl full of buttered popcorn and our traditional, special-occasion beverage: grape juice mixed with 7-Up. And I dreamed of being Dorothy singing that wonderful song, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." But, unlike Dorothy, I didn't want to travel *over* the rainbow. I wanted to find the end of it, to see if there really was a pot of gold waiting for me.

The day of my high school graduation was somewhat disappointing for me. It just wasn't as special as I had envisioned it. First, we couldn't hold the ceremony

outside on the football field due to rain. So we had to squeeze inside the gymnasium, where it was hot and noisy and crowded. After it was over, I had trouble finding my friends amid the throngs of people, and I felt very alone. But when I was leaving the building, I noticed the rain had stopped. I looked up and saw the most perfect rainbow in the sky. A promise from God. A reminder of life and love and hope.

We need a rainbow right now, don't we? Just when we felt like the vaccine was helping us turn the corner on this pandemic, then mass vaccination sites were closed or events were postponed because of ice. And cold. And more snow than Cape Girardeau has seen in years. We need a rainbow because it reminds us of a warm, spring rain. We need a rainbow because it reminds us that God is watching over us. We need a rainbow because it is a sign of hope and promise.

After the flood, God announced to Noah and his sons his promise to never again destroy the earth with a flood. In these nine verses from Genesis, the word *covenant* appears seven times. There is so much repetition here, it almost sounds as if God feels remorse over the flood. "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you..." "I will establish my covenant with you..." "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the

earth...” “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.”

It’s abundantly clear that *covenant* is a significant concept. If you’re at all familiar with the story of our faith, you know that covenant is indeed a driving force from Genesis through Revelation.

What’s interesting to me in these verses, is that there is no mention that this covenant has two sides. I expect it to read like a contract, with two parties agreeing to a balanced exchange. “Here’s what I will give, and here’s what I expect in return.” But here in Genesis, with God’s promise to all of creation, there seems to be no expectation of mutuality or reciprocity.

One commentary explained, “God’s initial utterance focuses intensely on God’s person and God’s resolve: *As for me...* What is to follow is God’s own peculiar, intentional, unilateral act. God claims complete initiative for the relationship.... Noah has no part in this new covenant, no role to play, and no obligation....The covenant is all God’s doing, an act of amazing graciousness, the very self-giving of God.” (*Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV - Year B*, Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome)

And more than that, the rainbow - the sign of God's promise - is placed in the clouds *not* as a reminder to us, but as a reminder to God.

This week I began watching a new docu-series on PBS on *The Black Church*. So far, it is a beautiful story of generations of slaves - before and after emancipation - finding their center, their sense of value, their sense of belonging, their sense of worthiness in the church. Not the church building, of course, but the congregation in worship.

The church was a gathering of family and friends and neighbors, all of whom were seeking nurture and catharsis and hope. They found it in the music and the prayers and the preaching. And they felt a connection to the Israelites who were slaves in Egypt until God, through Moses, led them to freedom. And they found a brother in Jesus, who suffered many of the same pains, who was put to death by political powers, and whom God raised to new life for the salvation of blacks as well as whites.

In this case, I think it's true that God expected nothing in return from them. They were giving all they had to give in blood, sweat, and tears under the punishing rule of their white masters. And yet, they did give back to God. They

gave their faithfulness in worship and praise. They gave their complete trust in God's promises to liberate and redeem them.

After all, what is a relationship without mutuality? Without give and take? Without fidelity and loyalty? Even when we can't see it with our eyes, we need to remember that the rainbow always has two ends. It starts with God's promises to us. And it ends with our faithfulness to God.

The church where I grew up had dozens of banners for different seasons and occasions, all of them handmade by various groups within the church. One of my favorites was actually two banners, which flanked the cross on the front wall of the church. The one on the left had a manger at the bottom and a rainbow arching up to the top. The banner on the right showed the other half of the rainbow arching down to the cross. I spent many Sunday mornings pondering the depth of meaning in those banners. And as I ponder them again, I realize that they align perfectly with the lesson from our scripture today.

The rainbow, the manger, and cross are all about God's covenant, God's promises, God's merciful, sacrificial, and self-giving nature. From Genesis to Revelation and throughout history, all of God's works are about God seeking

relationship and reconciliation with humanity and with all of creation. There is new life for the whole earth after the flood, and the rainbow symbolizes God's promise to never destroy it again. There is new life for us in the manger when God comes to earth in the flesh, in the person of Jesus. There is new life for us in the cross when God sacrifices his only son out of his love for the whole world.

There's another surprise I found, in addition to the idea that the bow in the clouds is a reminder not to us, but to God. Notice that though we imagine a beautiful, multi-colored rainbow in the clouds, the Bible only refers to a *bow*. Two commentaries, including the one I quoted earlier, suggested that the bow being referred to could be the kind that uses arrows. Quoting again, "The bow likely refers to God's bow (and arrows) as a weapon of war, hostility, and destructiveness. That the bow is suspended in the sky means that God has made a gesture of disarmament, has hung up the primary weapon, and now has no intention of being an aggressor or adversary. That is, the demobilized weapon of God is a gesture of peace and reconciliation. God intends to be *at peace* with God's world, recalcitrant though it has been." (*Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV - Year B*, Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome)

Peace, reconciliation, faithfulness, loyalty, graciousness, self-giving. That's a lot of promises packed into less than ten verses!

This Lenten season provides us with a good opportunity to ask ourselves whether - and how - we might appropriately respond to God's promises with our own. God's covenant in the rainbow is about saving humanity and all of creation. What can we possibly give in return? What is our part in the covenant? What will God find at OUR END OF THE RAINBOW?

May we do our part in making God's promises come true for all people... to the glory of God!

AMEN.