God’s Covenant Promise Peace Presbyterian Church

Genesis 9:8-17 1st Sunday of Lent

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In psycho-social development, the very first stage is the foundation for every other. It is the balance between trust and mistrust. As a pastor observing people’s faith and behavior for thirty-four years, I have seen many people who are insecure in many situations because their basic instinct is mistrust. They had early experiences in life that taught them to be afraid of people instead of feeling secure in the love of the most important people around them. The truth is – all of us have had both types of experiences – experiences that made us know the world was a safe place, and experiences which made us doubt that. If you are in the middle of a doubting time, we want to be here for you, helping you to feel more secure, more loved, to be your firm foundation. Hopefully, the sum total of all your experiences will add up to believing that you will be okay. While I was not always a trustworthy parent, I tried to model a humble position with the kids, so that they knew that I would admit to them when I had blown it. Richard and I have been surprised lately at the fact that I remember too well all the mistakes I or we made, while he remembers the joyful moments from the same events. We are actively working on the shared memory bank for more balance.

We are reading today the very good ending of a sad story. Of course, like all stories, it depends on whose perspective you are taking. For Noah and family, this story is a happy one of wisdom and triumph, against all odds. It is like us celebrating that we survived Hurricane Ian, despite our knowledge that many people just south of us lost their homes, their churches, their livelihood. It is like our reflections on getting through the first pandemic year 2020 when there was so much fear and so many deaths. The message on the far side of the storm is that God can be trusted. Of course, cynics would point out that the story itself questions that truth when you see the story from the perspective of those who died or grieved many losses. Cynicism is rampant in Ukraine and the Middle East right now. Think of all the lines we use when we are feeling overwhelmed. I’m drowning. I cannot keep my head above the water. A flood of fear came upon me. Negative thoughts flooded my mind. Drowning in debt. I don’t know how I will get through this storm. I’m sinking in despair. *When I was sinking down…*

Much of the anger in our world and belief that our situation is desperate, even though by many measures, our country has recovered well, is attributed to the doom and gloom of our post-traumatic pandemic brains. Thank God for Mother Julian of Norwich who said in the middle of her illness in the pandemic plague of the 14th century, “All shall be well and all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well.” She and we can believe that, because we trust in God’s covenant promise, assured to Noah, after their traumatic experience of the flood.

Prayer: Open our eyes to your goodness, O God, so we may live fruitfully in the trust that you are with us and that we are weathering our storms on the boat together, by the grace of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

***Genesis 9:8-17 (NRSVue)*** ***– God’s Covenant Promise***

**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.” **12**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.”

This is God’s message to those coming out of a storm – I am with you. I promise to protect you. Jesus said it too, “I am with you always, to the end of the age. Peace I leave with you. I am sending the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with you.” God gives a sign, the colorful rainbow that comes after the rain and sometimes even in the middle of the rain. The story of the flood (a common story for humankind) was likely originally heard during the exile, a disaster of another type. That’s why it is so important for us to employ narrative theology, as the stories are meant to shape our communal narrative by telling us of other times when God was faithful, after the people had been unfaithful.

What is so remarkable about this expression of the covenant promise (as distinguished from the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah) is that this is a unilateral promise. It is all God’s doing – no expectation of Noah and the family coming off the boat, after the flood. The usual verb for covenant making is cut, which is mutual agreement but here the verb is different and means God is raising it up entirely alone, not making a mutual covenant with humanity. In this way, it is like the new covenant in Jesus Christ – all done for us, with our only action being a grateful response.

The other way this covenant is like the new covenant in Christ is that it is clearly for all flesh or every living creature, including the animals who came off the boat. This is a sure sign of God’s commitment to the whole of creation and should give us some hope as we work to protect the earth ourselves. This should not leave us making irresponsible choice about the gift of the earth, but it should also keep us from cynicism. God has made a promise and says, “never again!” This is an expression of great loyalty, and is made for all time.

The use of the sign of the rainbow is according to this passage God’s laying down a weapon. Remember that in Biblical times a bow and arrow go together. It is interesting that in our day arrows are now symbols that go with Valentine’s hearts of love. And bows are things that go on presents, unless you were really into *The Hunger Games* a decade ago. But if you imagine the pre-scientific mind interpreting unending rain as being shot down from the heavens where God is, you can see how a colorful bow with no arrow is a promise that God has put down the weapon of destruction and exchanged it for a beautiful arc of promise and hope.

*Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue, and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true… In all the troubles of today, O God, help us to trust you more and more each day.* Until this week, I had never considered that perhaps Judy Garland was singing words that square with good theology.

The promise and hope of the rainbow was adopted in San Francisco in 1978 by Harvey Milk and Gilbert Baker and more officially in 1994 by the whole LGBTQ community at large as a symbol of the pride and promise of being able to come out in the trust of being supported and having allies.

The rainbow sign is used to communicate security and advocacy, despite storms of fear and hatred that get easily stirred up in our culture. At the *You are Not Alone* zooms we are sharing with Samaritan Counseling and other local LGBTQ affirming congregations on Tuesdays this month, we have heard stories of hope and promise, as well as sad stories which remind us of the challenge of finding a safe church.

The rainbow is a reminder that we all, all flesh, all creation belong to the God of love who promises to keep the covenant with us. It reminds us that God can be trusted even in difficult times. Crucial is the perspective of the narrative that God seems to see the rainbow as a reminder for God, not us. God says, “when I see the rainbow, I will remember.”

This is consistent with the psalms, which seem to indicate God needs reminding. They plead with God to remember the covenant, to remember the promises made to the people. When God remembers, gracious things happen, and we are supposed to be the ones who remind – much like children reminding their parents, “You SAID you would let us have candy or screen-time after we cleaned up our room!” Maybe that is the purpose of prayer – us being rainbows to God in the rain, reminding God of all the promises of sunshine, security, and faithfulness.

After all, is that not the nature of a healthy relationship – that we remind each other of promises made and encourage each other in the fulfillment of those promises? Whatever the consequences of human sin, and they are too many to list, one thing is sure – rejection and destruction by God is not among them. In life and in death, we belong to God who loves us with an everlasting love. To the degree we can trust in God’s covenantal promise, understanding it as grace, we will mature into people of integrity and then perhaps we will be rainbows of hope in other people’s clouds, as Maya Angelou suggested.