

“Clouds and Rainbows”  
Genesis 9:8-17/Luke 12:54-56

“This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” With those words, our Old Testament reading and this sermon series draw to a close. Ever since the Sunday after Easter, we have been reflecting on the Biblical narrative of a devastating flood. We have pondered the troubling decision by God to wipe out all life on earth and have journeyed with Noah and his family before, during, and after their time on the ark. Thus far, those accounts have helped us, as we emerge from a pandemic, to ponder what it means to start over, to build a faith that lasts, and to approach others with a spirit of humility due to our shared imperfect insight. We have considered how to return after 15 months and to limit new freedoms as an act of love. Along the way, we also heard God silently resolve never to destroy the earth again with a flood and today’s text tells of the moment that promise is spoken aloud.

It comes just after God had told Noah and his sons to “be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.” A current world population of 7.9 billion people suggests one man’s descendants have fulfilled that command, but our passage move on to the Divine One’s commitment. “As for me,” God continues, “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature...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.” Those words contain the first covenant found in Scripture. In the pages and years that follow, God will vow to make a great nation of Abraham and to be the God of Israel, to raise up an heir from David’s house as king and to write a holy law on human hearts. As Christians, we have promised to live in response to the New Covenant found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but the first divine/human agreement occurs when the ark is empty and God says, “Never again.”

Notice how that covenant does not require anything of human beings, but describes only what God will and will not do. That one-sided trait continues as God offers a visible reminder of the promise: “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” In ancient times, rainbows were viewed as a kind of heavenly archer’s bow and thus a threat from the gods, but the Lord re-frames that meaning. “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.” One scholar describes the arrangement this way: “God institutes and establishes the covenant, and the remembering of it becomes exclusively a divine responsibility. The covenant will be as good as God is.” (Terence Fretheim, *Genesis: The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 400). In other words, the promises are all from God.

For us, of course, a rainbow evokes other associations. The Irish legend speaks of a pot of gold that can be found at the end of a rainbow while a fictional girl from Kansas once sang of “somewhere over the rainbow.” The rainbow flag is a symbol of equality for all people regardless of their sexual orientation while the term “rainbow coalition” describes a group of unified voters who have diverse racial, religious, and political identities. In the Biblical sense, though, the rainbow points back to this moment and God’s vow to remember.

That image is a beloved one, yet just as we have seen at other times in this series of taking verses first heard as children and pondering them anew as adults, so does this promise raise a troubling question. “When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember,” we heard. A vow that can cause one to ask what happens if there is no rainbow or if God isn’t looking?

Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian minister and author, brings his imagination to that question as he suggests what may have gone through Noah’s mind on that day. “In one way...it

gave Noah a nice warm feeling to see the rainbow up there, but in another way, it gave him an uneasy twinge. If God needed a rainbow as a reminder...that could mean that if someday God didn't happen to look in the right direction or had something else on his mind, he might forget his promise and the heavy drops would start pattering down on the roof a second time." The writer goes on to have Noah recall all that had happened—the flood, endless days on the ark, receding waters, and sending of doves before returning to the promise. "‘Never again,’ God had said, and Noah clung to those words like a raft in a high sea. With the rainbow tied around his little finger to jog his memory, surely God would never forget what he’s said. No matter what new meanness [humans] might think up, surely the terrible things would never happen again." (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979, pp. 123-125)

The hope voiced in that fictional depiction of Noah remains the first part of that divine vow. Namely, that a rainbow reminds us of God's promise never do that again. Such a heavenly prism does not carry the vow that God will keep humans from destroying the earth—that task is ours—but it does proclaim that God will not repeat the events of the Great Flood.

Yet in that same moment, God makes another vow, that until this past week I had never noticed before. "When I bring clouds over the earth" God says "and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember." Moments later, God reiterates, "When a bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant." I had never given any thought to that repetitive mention of cloud cover and in fact, wondered why it was part of the text until one scholar wrote of how "no bow appears unless there are clouds." (Fretheim, *Ibid*, p. 400)

"No bow appears unless there are clouds." That line intrigued me and so I searched online to see if it is true and most of what I read confirmed that the only time a rainbow is visible is after a storm or when there are clouds present. Yet since I am not a meteorologist I quickly texted my brother-in-law who is and once worked for The Weather Channel. Here's what Bob told me: "All you need for a rainbow is water vapor and sunlight at the right angle. Water vapor can come from waterfalls, so you can have a cloudless day at Niagara Falls but you'll have a rainbow when the sun is low enough to refract through the mist."

Given my emerging second point in this sermon, that wasn't the answer I was wanted, so let me modify the 20<sup>th</sup> century Old Testament scholar's statement with the 21<sup>st</sup> century wisdom of my brother-in-law and say that "*ordinarily*, no bow appears unless there are clouds." Why does that statement grab me? Because I heard it to affirm that when there are clouds in our journeys and there are for all of us, when there are hardships you and I face and they come, when we are in the midst of or on the other side of a storm, and we all have moments like that, the rainbow reveals another divine promise. Not only that God will never cause a worldwide flood again, but that when clouds arise in our life, God continues to see and be present.

Jesus expresses that message in one of the few times he talks about weather in the gospels. Prior to our New Testament account, you can find a growing frustration in Jesus' voice. He has spoken of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and told an unsettling parable about a rich fool and then of the need to be ready for his return. Peter asks if those stories are intended only for the Twelve or for everyone and Jesus goes on to say he has come to bring fire and division.

It is then that we read of how Jesus turns to the crowd and says "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat and it happens.'" He is naming well-understood weather patterns in that part of the world; how clouds from the direction of the Mediterranean often lead to rain and winds from the desert mean heat is coming. As you

might guess, Jesus' primary point was not to talk of weather forecasting for he goes on to declare "You hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Among the many possible things Jesus was saying in that moment I hear him declare that many in the crowd are failing to see him as the clearest sign of God's love and presence. That while they could predict the weather with some accuracy, they failed to grasp the more essential clue that literally stood before them of God's care, and friends, we are their descendants.

For just as many in that crowd failed to grasp the embodied God who spoke to them so are there times when we miss the divine activity as well. We can get so caught up with how our career isn't progressing as we had planned that we fail to notice how God is preparing us for what is next. We can get so worried that our children are not absorbing all of the wisdom we are trying to convey that we fail to see how they are growing in to the unique person God created. Or we get so obsessed with the clouds of 21<sup>st</sup> century life—and there are many—that we miss the rainbows in other forms that reveal God's presence. Thus, just like those who heard Jesus speak, so do you and I need the eyes and wisdom of others at times to see God's ever-present care.

Dan Migliore, professor emeritus of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary once told of a time he received such a gift. "This past summer, I experienced an unexpected and unpretentious confirmation that God's promise and God's faithfulness are present in the city. I was given this assurance by a group of African-American children in the inner city of Trenton... a friend who helped to organize a summer program, invited me to take part in some of its activities. She suspected, I think that I would receive as much as I gave to the children.

"One day my assignment was to teach a small class of nine to ten-year-olds. Toward the end of our time together, three of the tired children asked me to read them a story from the Bible. I read [about] Noah and the rainbow. When I finished...I asked, 'Where do you look to see a rainbow?' It was, I am afraid, the patronizing question of a professor of theology."

"'On the streets,' I was told. Thinking they had misunderstood me, I repeated the question. 'On the streets,' came the reply again. 'You can see rainbows in the oil slicks on puddles in the streets and parking lots.'" In reflecting on that response, Migliore said, "These Trenton children had found God's promise of new life not up in the sky, not way up high... instead they had found the sign of God's promise way down low, in the grimy puddles of their city streets." (Migliore, Daniel "City Rainbows," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, @ 1994, p. 71)

May we keep our eyes and ears open as the impact of this pandemic begin to fade so that wherever we are, we will continue to notice and celebrate the rainbows provided by God. The One who declared long ago and affirms to us again, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."