

“A Sign of God’s Promise”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent II – February 28, 2021

Genesis 9: 8-17

Frederick Buechner writes: “It is an ironic fact that this ancient legend about Noah survives in our age mainly as a children’s story. This is really as dark a tale as there is in the Bible, which is full of dark tales. It is a tale of God’s terrible despair over the human race and his decision to visit them with a great flood that would destroy them all except for this one old man, Noah, and his family. Only now we give it to children to read. One wonders why” (*“A Sprig of Hope,” A Chorus of Witnesses*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, © 1994: 227-228).

Why has this story become such a focus for our children and their culture, while the reasons behind the story somehow become lost on us adults? Is it because we don’t want to admit that at one time in history, God was so fed up with the world he had created, that he decided to put an end to it and start all over? Is it because we wish that instead of a dark tale this could be a rosy, happy story from the Old Testament, and that by couching it in a children’s story we move further toward that goal?

Perhaps what is most important about this tale is that God chose one man and his family to save the world from his destruction. God knew that Noah was faithful, and would carry out God’s instructions regarding the building and supplying of the ark. There is no question that this narrative depicts God’s frustration with his people, and how God will go to great lengths, even destructive ones, to bring them back in line. But in the end, God offers a sign of promise and hope through Noah and his family, and that hope is where our reading picks up this morning.

The flood has subsided. The ark has reached dry land. The animals have been let out to roam free and repopulate the earth. Noah, his wife, sons and daughters-in-law are now resting after an eventful forty days and nights. The storm has passed, and now God has something to say to them.

“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:9-11).

It is with Noah that God begins a covenant. There will be many more which will follow him, but Noah is the first with whom God says, “This is my covenant with you.” In this covenant, there is nothing for Noah to do. It is a promise which God makes alone, a contract which is

of God's own initiative. "As for me, I am establishing . . ." Noah doesn't have a say in this covenant, but neither is he called to fulfill it with any further acts of faith or promises of his own. This promise of God comes as a result of the flood, and is an expression of hope which the earth had not had forty days earlier. As one commentator notes: "The covenant is all God's doing, an act of amazing graciousness, the very self-giving God"

(Texts for Preaching, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 1993: 192).

And in case the Lord has a memory lapse and forgets this contract which he has made with Noah, there will be a sign to remind God. "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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" (9:13-15).

That bow is more than the rainbow which we normally associate with this passage. It also refers to the bow of a bow and arrow, the weapons of a warrior who fights in battles and wars. The violence which comes from a bow will no longer touch the earth and the creatures who reside in it. For every time we see the bow in the clouds, we are reminded that God's bow is hung on the wall, never to cause the same destruction which was caused in the flood. "The bow is an invitation to 'basic trust,' for the world as God's creation is an utterly safe place" *(Texts for Preaching, 194).*

As we begin the season of Lent, that is an important message to hear. At this time of the Christian year, we often emphasize fasting, or sacrificing something, during the season of Lent. Why is that? When we give up food for a day, we vividly remember how much the Lord has given us in the fruits of the earth. When we turn away from selfish entertainment and turn towards our friends and family, we vividly remember that it is through the Spirit that God binds us together in community. When we add something to our daily routine, such as seasonal devotions or selected Bible readings, we vividly remember how God is with us every step of the way. As one preacher has said, "The purpose of religious discipline is to remember who God really is, what is promised by God, and what is required for God" *(Texts for Preaching, 184).*

As we continue our Lenten journey, God's gift of Jesus Christ is made even more meaningful because of the context of God's covenant. God made a promise to never again destroy the world after the flood, and Noah received this promise of faithfulness. Now, as we turn our eyes on Jerusalem, we are reminded that God is willing to even sacrifice his very own son for our sinful sake, giving up the love embodied in Jesus all because we have forsaken the Lord again. It will not be a flood this time, but rather a cross at Golgotha.

Jane Anne Ferguson writes: *The story of God's rainbow covenant was recorded by the people of Israel in the midst of exile from their*

homeland, in the midst of chaos for their community. Chaos is, of course, not an ancient phenomenon. Corporately, we know chaos in our twenty-first-century world through terrorism and war, through ecological and natural disasters, and through the gross inequity of the distribution of resources and wealth among the world's many peoples. Individually, chaos comes into our lives through relationships broken by death, estrangement, and divorce, through illness of body or mind, through addictions of all kinds. Much of this chaos we bring on ourselves, through our resistance to God's ways. To see and know God as the "One Who Remembers" us, corporately and individually, with love and forgiveness in the midst of life's chaos with all its pain and suffering, is to discover redemption. Hearing this story in Lent as we begin our walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem, we understand in a deeper, fuller way the God who sent him and whom he served.

The rainbow bending over Noah's ark with its doors wide open and spilling out pairs of animals into a new world is an image painted or hung on the walls of many a church nursery. We offer this story as a central message of God's love and hope to our children, starting at the earliest ages. It is telling that we want them to know that, even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget them. But why relegate this message to the nursery in the church basement? Why not let the rainbow colors emanate from the nursery up the stairwells and into worship and committee meetings, into youth group, adult education and mission projects, into choir rehearsal and church potlucks? What an extraordinary promise for the body of Christ! (Jane Anne Ferguson, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 28-30).

What an extraordinary promise for Christ's Church, indeed. I think of the incredible chaos we all have, are, and will live through during this pandemic – lives lost, jobs gone, chronic illness, increased stress, an uncertain future. It can be truly overwhelming, and we might wonder if God has forgotten us. But even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget us. If we look up and pay attention, we will see signs like the bow in the sky: a beautiful sunset in the western sky, a call from a friend at just the right moment, an offer to lend a hand when you most need it, a sense in your gut as to which direction you are called to take next. Signs of God's promise are with us – we just need to listen, look, and believe.

And signs of God's promise are present even when there is great sadness and uncertainty. Today is a very difficult day for a congregation with whom our church has a shared history. This morning, the congregation of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church will hold its final worship service, and the church will be closing permanently after today. In 1962, when John Knox Presbyterian Church was founded, the large majority of charter members here came from St. Andrew. In many ways, our congregation would not be here had it not been for the faithful

disciples of that church. But they have struggled in recent years, and their building became too much for their membership to support, especially when the pandemic hit a year ago.

Our own Lisa Crismore and Jillian Flynn are worshipping at St. Andrew today – Lisa spent her formative teenage and young adult years at St. Andrew, and Jillian did her year-long internship there during seminary. It will be a day full of tears, sharing stories and memories, and remembering how God touched the lives of so many individuals in that church's 70-plus years of service. For those disciples, it may be hard to see signs of God's promise amid the chaos of the closing of their beloved church.

But even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget us. Several of these faithful disciples have been worshipping with us online over the last few months, and I would hope that any who are searching for belonging would receive a warm, hospitable welcome by our Open. Caring. Community. I pray that all who are connected to St. Andrew would know that they are not alone in the days and weeks ahead, and that God might show each of them a bow in the sky that reminds them they will never be abandoned as they serve in Christ's name in their daily walk of faith.

Even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget us. May we hold onto the signs of God's promise which remind us that God will never forget us through the love we know in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to the living, loving God. Amen.