



The Promise of Relationship

Genesis 9:8-17

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One of the first Bible stories we ever learn, or at least one of the first Bible stories we remember, is the story of a man named Noah and a mighty flood, the story of animals in pairs and an enormous ark, the story — eventually — of sun and a bird and a branch and a rainbow.

Do you remember the last time you saw a rainbow? I was driving down Elmwood Street toward Bull Street, on my way back to church one afternoon. I nearly ran the red light at Sumter Street because I saw the arc in the sky and I couldn't look away. There's just something about rainbows. Even as adults, we point them out to one another with urgency and excitement and joy building in our chests, so much so that you can hear it. "Come, look!" we say to another. "Look at the rainbow!"

A number of years ago now, I preached at a gathering of Presbyterian Mission Co-Workers in El Salvador. These good folks worked all over Latin America partnering to improve access to education and clean water and health care. Once every three years, they gathered for a week-long retreat. I was their preacher — someone who did not know the work they did and did not speak enough Spanish to get by without a translator. It was, shall we say, not the best plan, and for the first few days, things were undeniably tense. We stumbled our way through, all the way to the final day, where we were kept inside by heavy rains. Only toward the end of the day did it

subside, and a rainbow peeked through the clouds. "Look," a man named Robert said, directing my attention to the array of colors. "It is a reminder," he said, "That even when it is hard, even when we do not see eye to eye, we can still belong to one another."

"This is the sign of the covenant," God says, "a covenant between me and you and all living creatures for all future generations."

It was a few years after that that I officiated my last wedding at Village Church in Kansas, the wedding of Ali and Abby. Ali and Abby were in love, but they — and their families — were also afraid. Kansas is home to some of the very finest people I know. Kansas is also home to the Westboro Baptist Church and all their picket signs and messages of hate and they had been to Village before. No rainbows, Ali and Abby said. Nothing to draw extra attention. Their wedding was beautiful. One of my favorite photographs of that day still hangs on my office wall here in Columbia. It's a photo of the church exterior taken about two minutes before the wedding's final blessing. One of the photographers had gone outside to catch the couple as they walked down the aisle and then out the doors. No rainbows, Ali and Abby begged, because theirs was the first wedding in that town since laws had changed, since church process and court rulings found the right side of history. You know what happens next, of course. Ali and Abby walked outside their

church, hand in hand, newly bound together by a covenant of their own to find not one, but two enormous rainbows framing the church building filling the sky with promise. It was a sign, their families said later, a sign that we don't have to be afraid.

"I have set my bow in the clouds," God says, "and it is a sign of the covenant I have established."

The story of a man named Noah and a mighty flood the story of animals in pairs and an enormous ark the story of sun and a bird and a branch and a rainbow ... it is about many things. But the rainbow is God's promise that we don't have to be afraid. That we can be at peace. The rainbow is God's everlasting covenant with all creation. It is a gift, and it is, as one preacher puts it, "a colorful corrective for anyone who believes that all the grace in the Bible is in the New Testament. It is not. The sacred story is full of grace from the very beginning. We have had an almost reverse way of fighting it off, though, almost as if we cannot stand too much good news."¹

Because first there was Adam and Eve, who along with all of creation were deemed good and very good, free to roam about in the Garden of Eden, free to do as they pleased and eat anything they liked — anything — save for the fruit of one tree. That one small boundary would prove too much, though, and they would eat what was forbidden, and suddenly grow in knowledge — and in shame. Aware of their nakedness, fear enters scripture for the first time. We were afraid, they say, and so God, before casting them out of Eden, nevertheless responds to their fear, stitching together skins and sticks to fashion the first clothes. Grace was there from the beginning.

But then our human patterns continue. With Cain and Abel, brother turns against brother and murder enters our lexicon, and envy and jealousy and competition become the

currency of the day. Wickedness begins to multiply as fast as the people, leading God to finally say in the sixth chapter of Genesis, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created, for I am sorry I have made them." It is one of the lowest points of scripture, to be sure. How quickly everything falls apart. We move from "and God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" to "I am sorry that I have made them," in less than five chapters.

But Noah, for whatever reason, Noah finds favor in the sight of the Lord, and with that favor comes instructions for an ark, basically a giant, floating barn, with turtles and toucans and hippos and bobcats and caterpillars and groundhogs and lions and tigers and bears all floating above the swirling chaos where the rest of the earth is ending.

It was awful. Barbara Brown Taylor makes the point, "We focus on Noah and his zoo because they survived, but no one and nothing else did. The cleansing was complete and the destruction was total."

It was so horrible, in fact, even to God, maybe especially to God, that God promises never to will such a thing again, saying to Noah and his sons, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every creature that came out of the ark, that never again. Never again shall all flesh be cut off, never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. Never again. And I will set my bow in the clouds and when I see it, I will remember my covenant, always and forever."

It's fascinating, really, that God says the rainbow is for his own reminder, not ours.

My friend Sarah, she has twin seven year olds. When they were just a few months old, I flew out to see her and my main job was to hold whichever of the two didn't need her at any given moment. One day as her daughter was screaming her head off as Sarah bounced

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*.

her in a futile attempt at soothing, I heard Sarah whispering, "Zoe Winsett, child of the covenant. Zoe Winsett, you are a child of the covenant" and I told her how sweet I thought that was. "Remind them even before they can forget," I said, but she cut me off. "Jenny," she said, "I am not reminding Zoe she's a child of the covenant. I'm reminding myself because right now, it's pretty easy to forget."

"I will set my bow in the clouds, and when I see it, I will remember my covenant. I will remember my promise."

You know, from a theological perspective, the history of the world is really the history of God's promises to us. The promise of peace to Noah. The promise of land and a nation to Abraham and Sarah. The promise of law and instruction to Moses. The promise of a son to Mary. They all come at different times, to different people, in different circumstances, but they are all the same promise when it comes down to it. They are all the promise of a relationship, a real, ongoing relationship with God.

"I will remember my covenant," God says.

The thing is, most covenants are mutual. And most of them spell out with great specificity what is expected of each party. What each participant will and will not do. But this covenant with Noah has no conditions at all. There is not one word about what Noah will or will not do. It is only about what God will and will not do. "I will never again cut off all flesh with a flood, and I will never again destroy the earth. I will put a rainbow in the sky and when I see it, I will remember what I have promised."

God knows he will sometimes need a reminder, just like my friend Sarah sometimes needed a reminder. Because the truth is, humankind doesn't change after the flood. We are not miraculously made better. Miguel de la Torre, in his commentary on Genesis, is quick to point this out. Wickedness springs up on the earth before the flood, he says, but it isn't long

before it returns after. The waters have barely receded before Jacob steals Esau's birthright and Aaron dances around a golden calf and all the rest.

The story of the flood is not a story about a change in humankind. It is a story about a change in God, who swears off retribution and chooses relationship instead, forevermore. Never again will God repay betrayal with betrayal. Never again will God let sorrow lead him to destroy. Instead, God binds himself to creation and promises himself to it even though he knows enough and has seen enough to know it will hurt him. To know we will hurt him. In this moment, in this story, God says, "I will let myself be hurt. I will bear it, no matter the cost."

God's promise is a promise of life. A promise of death no more. That is what we remember throughout Lent. That is what this season will show us again and again and again — the depth and breadth of God's love that will never, no never, no never forsake us, never again.

We have been in the midst of a long and mighty storm. We have been trapped inside a smaller, darker world than we are used to, for way more than 40 days now. And like Noah and his zoo, we are waiting desperately for the sign that it is safe to come out again.

The story of Noah and the promise of God assures us that even if it feels like forever since the sun has shone on our faces, even if the giraffe's neck is a bit sore, even if the eagle's wings will need to stretch a bit before they can fly again, even if our singing voices will need a warm up, even if our arms will need to remember how to hug again, we are not alone in the ark, and we will not be there forever.

We are not trapped forever by this pandemic or any other storm life may have in store.

Because the flood waters always recede. The ark's hatch always cracks open. The rainbow always stretches across the sky. And God's

promises — for life, not death; for flourishing,
not fear; for delight, not despair; for embracing,
not isolating; for relationship, not rejection —
God's promises are always and ever true.