

8th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)



Photo by Ellen K. Jaffe as featured in the Shelter Island Reporter (June 22nd, 2015)

Genesis 8:20-9:17

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.

And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.'

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 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. 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.' 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: 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. 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.' 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.'

In elementary school, I was taught - as I suspect you were, too - a little acronym in the form of a man's name called Roy G. Biv.

Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet.

These are the colors of the rainbow. We've all seen rainbows; they can be quite magnificent. In fact, just a few weeks ago, the Shelter Island Reporter featured a photograph of a beautiful one captured over the waters between Shelter Island and Greenport.

Scientifically speaking, we now can explain this phenomenon in the following way: light travels in different wavelengths with each color representing a certain length. Red, on one end of the spectrum has the longest wavelength. Violet, on the other end, has the shortest. When light enters a water droplet, the droplet acts as a prism which separates light into its respective wavelengths - hence, Roy G. Biv.

But long before we came to this scientific understanding of a rainbow, we understood this colorful mystery in a theological framework which was, and is, no less true. Theologically speaking, the rainbow reminds us - and, equally, God *himself* - that God has promised to never again destroy the earth by the powerful waters that tested the strength of Noah's ark for forty long days and forty long nights.

That promise which we celebrate and rejoice was born out of a place of intense pain and grief. We sometimes are too quick to reduce this story to a simple tale of God's vengeful judgment. However, if we take a closer look at the text, we see that the flood narrative begins first and foremost with a grieving God who, rather than maintaining a safe distance from creation, willingly stands *with it* and is moved to sadness by its turmoil, violence, and corruption.

Something must be done. God's plan for creation and fruitfulness can not be threatened by human mistakes. God loves creation far too much to stand idle while it descends deeper into madness. And so, the grieved Parent is forced to intervene.

It has been said that "as any parent knows, the pain of childbirth does not end when the delivery is over."¹ God has given birth to creation and creation is rebelling. Walter Brueggemann goes so far as to

¹ Celia B. Sinclair, *Genesis*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 33.

note the heartbreaking irony that the very God who sentenced women to having pain in childbirth is now willfully feeling that very same pain on a even greater scale.²

And so, for forty days and forty nights, the tears of God rain down from heaven and creation is rebooted. Instead of spending nine months in a mother's womb, Noah and his family and the animals spend forty days in a wooden womb, floating amid the flood of God's un-creation, awaiting the dove's signal that the water has broken.

And once the water breaks, creation's birth begins again.

But alas, as we all know, this re-creation did not solve all of humanity's corruption. One does not have to look far to be reminded that the grief felt by God prior to the flood is likely being felt by God this very moment. The point of the flood was to give creation a restart and to change the heart of humanity. However, at the risk of sounding incredibly cynical, the heart of humanity has not and did not change. Even God recognized that after the flood. In today's first reading, God said *after the flood* that the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth. God, it seems, is fully aware that this second creation is at just as much risk for backsliding as the creation that preceded it.

And yet...

And yet, after the water breaks and the flood recedes, it is not humanity that has a change of heart but God who has a change of heart.

God, having been transformed by the pain of childbearing, decides to make a promise. And the promise is this: "never again."

Never again will God destroy every living creature. Never again will God's tears flood the earth and bring destruction. 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.

This promise is so important, so vital to the continuation of God's plan for creation, that God sets a bow in the sky to remind Noah and all of his descendants - including *us* - that *never again* will God do what has been done. As Walter Brueggemann reminds us, "God is as fresh and new in relation to creation as he calls us to be with him. He can change his mind, so that he can abandon what he has made; and he can rescue that which he has condemned."³

The rainbow has been given not just as a reminder to us but also as a reminder to the very God who placed it in the sky in the first place. This rainbow does *not* promise us that natural disasters and other calamities will cease to exist. What the rainbow *does* promise is that such horrible things are not the doing of God's anger or judgement.

There have been many floods since this flood. There have been far too many earthquakes, and hurricanes, and tornadoes, and wildfires, and AID's epidemics, and so on and so forth. Accordingly, there have been far too many biblical literalists like Pat Robertson and Fred Phelps who try to convince us that

²Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, ©1982), 77.

³ Brueggemann, 78.

natural disasters are God's form of divine retribution for our sins. This rainbow, this sacred promise of God, tells people like that to shut up!

God has not promised an end to all floods. What God has promised is to never again be the instigator of them but rather a companion *with us* when they knock at our door. God knows we are not perfect. God knows that we will - and have - screwed up again. But, if we look closely at the text of this "rainbow covenant" with Noah and us, we notice that there are no requirements to this promise. God does not say "I will never again destroy the earth by flood *if you do this and don't do that.*" God simply puts a rainbow in the sky to say, "I will never again destroy the earth." Period.

Friends, that's grace. That's the rainbow. It is not a pollyanna promise of peace and prosperity. The rainbow does not promise an end to hardship. The rainbow does not say that our actions don't have consequences. But the rainbow does promise to us that God will be there with us no matter what.

That's not always an easy promise to remember. Sometimes it storms and there is a beautiful rainbow in the sky. Other times it storms and there's nothing left but a cold, grey sky of emptiness. Destruction comes in all forms and it's all too easy sometimes to feel like God has given up on us. Floods come all the time; it's part of the human condition. The divorce is ravaging the family. The debt is straining the marriage. The bullying is torturing the teenager. The racism is strangling the immigrant. The alcoholism is taking control. The alzheimer's is stealing the spouse. The list can, and does, go on and on. These things are floods but they do not come from God. The rainbow tells us that God has not given up on us and there's not a darn thing we can do to change God's mind about *that*.

We will end today's sermon in a prayer and this prayer is going to be a written one. I would like to share with you an exercise that we did a few days ago in the Genesis Bible study. I invite each of you to think of a source of conflict in your life that you would like most to be affected by God's rainbow promise. What is a flood in your life that needs a new creation? What relationship is torn that needs an olive branch to signal dry land? What part of your life needs to be deconstructed in order that God's re-creation might take place? What flood do you have that makes it so that you so desperately need reminding that that beautiful rainbow represents a promise not just made to Noah and his family but also to *you and yours*?

On the back of your bulletin you will find a picture of a rainbow. As we begin to pray, I invite all of us - myself included - to take a crayon and to write beneath the rainbow one or more of those conflicts that need that rainbow promise. Our petitions will be lifted to God but please know that these bulletins will remain privately in your possession. It is my hope that these rainbows will remind us and God of a promise made to us unconditionally as God's beloved creation.

Let us pray...