

## Remember the Rainbow

When was the last time you saw a rainbow? For a very long time, rainbows have charmed and fascinated human beings. Rainbows abound in song and story. In “The Wizard of Oz,” Dorothy daydreams about a land somewhere *over* the rainbow. Kermit the frog sings of someday—someday!—finding the rainbow connection. And according to Irish folklore, at the end of the rainbow lies a pot of gold. It was put there by the faeries, and it’s guarded by leprechauns. But a rainbow is elusive. If you try to chase it or to reach its end, it dances tantalizingly just ahead of you. And then it fades away altogether.

Because the miracle of the rainbow is a fleeting, iridescent reflection of the sun’s rays on droplets of moisture in the clouds.

But sometimes a photographer is fortunate enough to catch a rainbow with a camera. Years ago, I received a marvelous gift: a beautiful photo of a rainbow in Denali National Park in Alaska. If you’d like to see it, it’s here in the sanctuary today. I’ve seen rainbows in faraway places. But two of the most breathtaking rainbows I’ve ever beheld have been right here in

South Carolina. One appeared on Johns Island, before sunset on a Holy Thursday. And the other was an incredible *double* rainbow, with two complete, concentric arcs over a lowcountry beach. I'll never forget them.

We don't soon forget where we were when we saw a rainbow. Because rainbows are rare. Rare and lovely. They enchant. They capture our imaginations.

But what do they have to do with Lent? On this first Sunday in Lent, why are we considering rainbows?

I'm glad you asked! Truly, this passage from Genesis is a most fitting reading with which to begin our Lenten journey. For through the centuries, Lent has been a season for contemplating our human condition, for confessing our sin-damaged human natures. Our fallen natures got that way through the disobedience of our first parents in the garden, which we read about in the early chapters of Genesis.

And from then on, things go from bad to worse. God sees so much violence, so much evil in the world that by the time of Noah, God regrets creating human beings. God sorrows. And God decides to start over. God resolves to flood the whole earth.

This narrative is deeply familiar, isn't it? We've heard it since we were kids. Many churches have decorated their nurseries with images of Noah's ark. In one church's engaging, hand-painted mural, two turtles amble toward the ark. A couple of giraffes are already on board. And overarching it all is a rainbow.

Kids love it. They love to sing the fun songs about the all the animals that went in the arky-arky. Two by two. It's a favorite Bible story. A cute, sweet children's story.

But this account of the great flood is far darker than a children's story. During the flood's forty days, which serve as a pattern for Lent's forty days, all life on earth—except for the small remnant on the ark—is swept away in the waters of chaos. Wiped out. Totally destroyed. In a horrific, catastrophic event of unimaginable proportions.

Do you think that seeing the utter devastation of the flood is what changes the heart of God? I don't know. But the writer of Genesis wants us to know that after the flood, God's heart *is* somehow changed. After the flood, *the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again...destroy every living creature as I have done."*

God chooses a different way forward. God tells Noah and his family, “*I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you and every living creature...*” God’s bow is a sign that God has made a covenant with every living thing on this earth.

But have we humans forgotten this covenant?

Not long ago, on an outing with our grandchildren, Bob and I watched as they went on a ride called the Carousel of Endangered Animals. Of all the animals represented on that carousel, every single one belongs to a species created by God but now endangered by human beings. Species that may not be around for generations yet unborn.

That carousel serves as a compelling reminder of this covenant with all living creatures. You and I are people of the covenant. As people who have seen in the clouds the rainbow sign of God’s covenant, we are called to hallow the sacredness of all life, including earth’s non-human inhabitants.

We are called to care for animals. More than two hundred years ago, John Wesley, founder of Methodism, preached and pleaded passionately for the humane treatment of animals. Wesley knew that animal suffering for the sake of human

pleasure and gratification is not in accordance with God's desire for the well-being of every living thing.

The decisions you and I make every day about what to eat, what to wear, what kinds of entertainment to choose, even what household and personal care products to purchase—these decisions reflect our concern or our lack of concern about animal suffering in each of these facets of our lives. Because our God is in relationship with every creature, we live in relationship with them, too.

And not only with the creatures, but with the earth as well. *God said, I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.* God cares deeply for this fragile planet we live on. God has made a covenant with the earth itself.

But have we humans forgotten this covenant? Have we forgotten that we have a share in the divine commitment to honor this covenant? Human beings are stripping the earth of its forests. Plundering its resources. Demolishing its natural habitats. Shattering the delicate balance of its ecosystems. Humans pollute earth's air, soil, and waters. Globally, sea levels continue to rise, displacing people and wildlife. Could it be that

the earth *will* once again be destroyed by flood—not by God, but by the self-serving actions of human beings?

Human beings who now have the capability to destroy the earth and all life on it with terrifying nuclear weapons.

Human beings who seem not to understand what it means that our God has set a bow in the clouds. Now a bow, when fitted with arrows, is a weapon of death. A weapon of destruction. But God's bow is a bow *without* arrows. A bow God has hung in the clouds. To hang up a weapon is to withdraw from conflict, to lay aside aggression and violence in relating to one another.

But we humans have not yet done that. Have we forgotten the responsibility we bear in helping to keep this covenant that God has made with all flesh?

*Covenant* is a powerful word. The word *covenant* has power because it both signifies and shapes the central relationship of our lives: our relationship with the Holy One who has created us.

In the biblical narrative, this God of relationship makes several covenants with human creatures. But we pay particular attention to *this* covenant because it's the very first. As the first

covenant God makes, it's *inclusive*. God makes this covenant not only with Jews, not only with Christians, not only with Americans, but with peoples of *all* places. With all flesh.

God makes this covenant with Noah and his family. But not with them only. Although the rainbow is transitory, the covenant is everlasting. For future generations and for *all* times. Including ours. And this covenant is unconditional. No matter how horrendous the sin of human creatures, this covenant stands.

Our God is patient, as the First Letter of Peter reminds us. With patience beyond our comprehension, God waits. Patiently, God waits. In the days of Noah, God waits. In Noah's time, and still today. Patiently, God waits for an end to human hostility and carnage. Patiently, God waits for us to take retaliation and brutality off the table as options for our life together in this global community. Patiently, God waits for an end to human greed and lust, for an end to human self-absorption and idolatry and power struggles.

For no matter what happens: *As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.* God will never again destroy all life.

Long ago, in the time of Noah, God establishes a covenant that remains in place today. A unilateral covenant.

Now you know that most covenants are two-sided. Most covenants are made between two parties, and each party is expected to abide by their side of the agreement. But in this one-sided covenant, God places expectations only on God's self.

It's not only a covenant. It's a promise! God makes a promise, asking nothing in return. That's grace. Sheer grace. Grace is free.

But grace is not cheap. God's grace calls for human response. As recipients of grace—measureless, poured-out grace—we lift up our eyes. We look up. We see the rainbow. We see the rainbow and we remember God's covenant.

And we are not the only ones who see it. Our God, who makes and places rainbows, sees also. And our God never forgets. *When[ever] the bow is in the clouds, [God] will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.* God sees the rainbow. God remembers.

Beloved, remember the sign of the covenant. Remember it as a sign of the eternal goodness and the great faithfulness and



the unfailing mercy of God. This is the God who loves you—you!—so much that God remembers the covenant. This is the God who waits patiently.

And this is the God who, in the fulfillment of God's perfect time, acts. This is the God who sends God's own Son. The One you follow.

As you follow Jesus through these forty days of Lent, knowing well where the path will lead, remember God's promise to not destroy you, but to save you. Remember the rainbow!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.