

Genesis 9:8-17

9:8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

9:9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,

9:10 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.

9:11 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."

9:12 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:

9:13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

9:14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,

9:15 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.

9:16 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."

9:17 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."

1 Peter 3:18-22

3:18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,

3:19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison

3:20 who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

3:21 And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

3:22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Proclamation of the Word

I saw a "Funniest Home Video" last week on TV. The cutest little girl is holding her home phone, dialing up her grandma. As the phone rings you see she is looking out of the window to a beautiful, full rainbow with some homes in the far distance. An answering machine picks up. The little girl says, "Mimi, there's a rainbow and it's hitting your house..a rainbow hitting the house. It's pink, red, yellow, green, and purple. I think you have the treasure, so when you get home look in the garden and find the treasure....call me back, ok?"ⁱ

The rainbow. We have assigned so much meaning to rainbows including leprechauns and a pot of gold at the end. I grew up on Lucky Charms cereal commercial which promoted this myth. I would beg my mom to buy "me Lucky Charms." Probably where I also got my bad Irish accent! The story of Noah and the ark has inspired many baby nurseries decor including one of our own. But as adults we read the witness of Scripture and know that the meaning goes so much deeper.

To summarize: God saw the destruction humankind had wrought upon the earth. God suffered the grief of seeing what he had created, but instead of destroying the whole earth, God chose Noah and his family to be saved.

For those of us on this side of the Resurrection who know God saves through Jesus Christ, perhaps we have lost the shock value of this. For an ancient person of faith, the conclusion would be that God would, of course, destroy the earth, for God is judge and rightful owner of all that is. The shock is that God chose to deliver and save us!

Our world may look somewhat similar to the world in Noah's day. We do not have to look too hard to see "wickedness and evil" today- the threat of ISIL, environmental degradation, racial violence, and the renewed fear that breeds anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim, anti-Christian attitudes across the world. People fight over the control of resources and power. Humans destroy one another and the good earth in the process. Reminds me of a hymn we sing, "God of Grace and God of Glory," "Cure Thy children's warring madness, bend our pride to Thy control... Grant us wisdom. Grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom's goal."

Do you know how God reacts when God sees the destruction people have done?

We read in Genesis 6:5-6, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." (NIV)

Did you hear it?

God saw. God was grieved, and his heart was filled with pain. Is this the God you know?

Have you ever invested in a project pouring your heart, your time, your resources, your whole life into it, and then to be disappointed with the outcome? I can only imagine that is a smidgen of what God experienced.

Did you know that God suffers, too?

Our faith does not gloss over suffering, but it also gives witness to the promises of God which overcome death and destruction. For Noah and his family, God makes the first covenant. A covenant in the near east was usually used when a nation conquered another nation. In return for not being

destroyed, a conquered people would declare loyalty to the new nation. It was usually an unequal covenant- one party in the position of power. In this same way God chooses to make a covenant rather than totally destroy the whole creation. And through the water of destruction, God offers a life-boat of protection to Noah.

The text tells us that Noah was a righteous man, but in reality, Noah had his issues. Perhaps he was simply more righteous than the rest, but not perfect. God did not save Noah because he was perfect, but because God's grace is perfect. God's choice to save is a shock! God had every right as Creator and rightful owner of all that is to do as God pleased. But instead, the bow of war-making and death becomes a symbol of hope and new life, a rainbow in the clouds, not just a reminder to us, but a reminder to God of the promise to never again destroy all living creatures. Scott Hoezee tells about, ⁱⁱ

...an article by Princeton Seminary professor Daniel Migliore. Dr. Migliore and his wife, Margaret, do a lot of work with inner-city kids in Trenton, New Jersey. One day in re-telling the Noah story to some of the children of Trenton, Professor Migliore asked the children's sermon-like question, "Now then, boys and girls, where do you see rainbows?" "In the street!" several replied. Migliore thought they misunderstood the question so he asked them again. "No, where do you see rainbows?" Once again several children replied, "In the street!"

Upon further checking, he discovered the truth: about the only place those kids, consigned to asphalt jungles and high-rise tenements, had seen a rainbow was in street puddles that had become slicked with oil from a car with a leaky engine. Their rainbows were these greasy and grimy ones in the burned-over streets and alleys of their urban world.

There's something sad about that—a cause, you might say, for grief. But there's maybe something hopeful there, too—an occasion, you might say, for grace. After all, where else do such children need to see the sign of God's hope than smack in the middle of the world they call home? They don't need a rainbow soaring over the Rocky Mountains, they need one in the greasy puddles of their everyday lives.

In the same way, God took our suffering upon himself on the cross, returning no violence for violence to show us a different way. God takes an empty cross, used for capital punishment and makes it a sign of new life. God offers a rainbow in the grease and grime of our lives.

God desires to be in relationship with us. Like a parent who desires to know and love his child, God covenants and promises to always be for us. Through the saving waters of Baptism, we become part of Christ. We belong to his body. We share in his life, his death, and his resurrection. It is a mutual relationship. God in Jesus shares in our life, death, and resurrection. Covenant is ultimately about that relationship.

We are not saved from the water. Saved through the waters of baptism, given a fresh start. The suffering exiles to whom Peter writes would take hope in their Baptism as that which gives them identity and deliverance. They would have known that God suffers with them.

A few years ago Dr. Abraham Verghese wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* about being a part of a medical team serving victims of Hurricane Katrina. Dr. Verghese had learned to steel himself against the sight of human suffering in order to do his work. Then one night he treated an elderly gentleman who had spent two days perched on the a ledge on his roof without food or water, his house becoming an ark in the flood waters. A rescue boat finally picked the man up and dropped him off at a bridge with other refugees. Verghese was so deeply moved by the man's story and said the only words he could think to say were, "I'm sorry, so sorry." The man stood up, shook his hand, and said, "Thank you, Doc. I needed to hear that." Afterward Dr. Verghese who always tried to steel himself against human suffering, realized this did not help anyone. He writes, "The willingness to be wounded may be all we have to offer."ⁱⁱⁱ

We are not called to deny suffering or run from it, but to let our hearts, like God, grieve. The rainbow, so beautiful, so hopeful, is only possible because of the storm that precedes it.

The Son of God suffered and died to open up, as Hoezee writes^{iv}, "a fountain of grace that will never run dry, a good floodtide, a flood that saves. Now as much as ever, the world needs the gospel's rainbow of hope. We, too, grieve over how things go in this world. But even our grieving is done with the knowledge of God's overarching grace. It's our privilege as God's people to let that grace in us shine forth from us, displaying that rainbow of grace," so others may know the promises of God's covenant to all living creatures and begin again.

God always uses signs with the covenant: a rainbow, a cross, water, bread and cup.

Perhaps we can be signs, too.

We can be reminders of the fresh start God offers.

For that is the real treasure that lies at the foot of the rainbow, a fresh start and a promise of never again.

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ⁱ "Grandma's got the Gold," www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAMDz8NIm9Q

ⁱⁱ Scott Hoezee, *Sermon Starters for Old Testament Lectionary* at cep.calvinseminary.edu

ⁱⁱⁱ Abraham Verghese, "Close Encounters of the Human Kind." *New York Times Magazine*, September 18, 2005, 192.

^{iv} Hoezee