

Sermon – Light and Color
Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15
Sunday, February 18, 2024
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Genesis 9:8-17, records the first in a series of covenants between God and creation. The flood story is a part of the pre-patriarchal narrative in Genesis 1-11. Chapter 12 begins the Hebrew history with the covenant between God and Abram. The first 11 chapters of Genesis, beginning with creation and concluding with the Tower of Babel, give an account of the origin and spread of human sin ---as well as a glimpse into the heart of the Hebrew God, Yahweh. As with the creation story, the flood story is not unique to the Hebrew scripture. Parallel stories are found in Babylonian sources. The differences are found in the role and character of Yahweh. The Hebrew flood story highlights the second chance humanity receives because of God's benevolence and the relationship between God and Noah. Rather than understand God as hostile, the ancient Hebrew scripture portrays God as loving and God's covenant as unconditional. Listen to God's Holy Word.

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.' Amen.

The God who gave us the rainbow in Genesis is the God who embraced our humanity and journeyed to the cross in Christ Jesus. Several hundred years after the story of the rainbow, God's light continues to color our world in the coming of Christ. Mark introduces his gospel not with Christ's birth, but with Christ's baptism "coming up out of the water" and with the affirmation of Christ's humanity "forty days fasting in the wilderness." On this first Sunday of Lent, our second Scripture reading is Mark 1:9-15. The forty days of lent commemorate the 40 days Christ spent fasting and praying, preparing for his ministry. Hear now God's Holy Word.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on Jesus. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. Amen.

The title of the sermon “Light and Color”

The Text: 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. Genesis 9:16

Let us pray. We give you thanks, Holy and loving God, for the gift of light and color as we reflect on the meaning of the rainbow. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Perhaps the most vibrant rainbows Peter and I have witnessed together were in the lush and humid Amazon Rainforest under the equatorial sun on a medical mission in June of 2011. What a wonder it was to wake up on the solstice to the colorful bow across the sky following an eleven-hour motorized canoe journey the prior day and a three-a.m. wake-up call for Peter to attend a young village woman in labor!

Every day during the mission we saw both sun and rain: the sun would bear down its heat, refreshing rain would cool our bodies and wash our clothes, and the sun would arrive again to bring its warmth, dry our clothes, and manifest the beauty of a rainbow, as the myriads of prismatic raindrops broke the sun rays into a stunning spectrum of colors arching across the blue sky.

According to Genesis, the bow that God set in the clouds following forty days of overwhelming rainfall was intended to remind God who said to Noah “I will see it and I will remember the everlasting covenant” to never again destroy the earth. The bow in the sky which we have come to associate with the rainbow originally referred to the bow of an arrow. God placed the bow, the symbol of a weapon, in the sky as a sign of the covenant not to destroy creation. God will not abandon the world or the people God created.

Ironically, today humans pose the greatest risk to destroying the world God created, not only because we refuse to put down our weapons, but also because we unintentionally continue to produce greenhouse gases that lead to global warming. Scientists tell us that our way of life is making war on nature and will likely bring more tropical disease, severe droughts, and intense storms. We may have no malicious intent; however, our shortsightedness and stubbornness could also destroy the world. While God promises not to destroy humankind again, it is up to humankind not to destroy God’s world.

Nonetheless, the rainbow is a sign of hope and there are times in our personal lives and in the history of our civilization when there is great need for a rainbow, a reminder that our covenant making God will not abandon us. Overshadowed by dark memories or paralyzed by tragedy we sometimes can see nothing but difficulties. Our belief in what lies beyond the clouds of difficulty is the hope of the rainbow. In this powerful story of old, Noah did not make the rainbow, God put it there. Our hope is in the God whom we trust, God’s eternal goodness will not fail us, and God transcends human barriers and difficulties.

Indeed, joy is like the rain! It is out of our struggles, challenges, losses, and sorrows that we discover the vibrant hue and the variety of the many shades that color and give our lives meaning. We have the capacity to grow into beautiful, comprehensive, and inclusive human beings when God’s rays shine through the raindrops baptizing our lives with a full spectrum of color and diversity.

The rainbow as the sign of the first unconditional covenant between God and God's creation is the beginning of our understanding that God is loving. However, the God who would not destroy the earth has come a long way to the God of Calvary who embraces our humanity and enters our suffering to make us whole.

Our understanding of God's nature as revealed in the writings of Holy Scripture has evolved through the generations and pages of history with new covenants and new experiences. Each time we are more surprised than the time before that God's eternal goodness is in God's covenantal love and that God goes beyond human barriers and difficulties by entering into them.

According to Mark, immediately following Christ's baptism, he was driven into the wilderness for forty days, where he was tempted by Satan to deny his humanity. Christ willingly entered into this desert experience which colored his perspective with compassion and prepared him for a life of ministry and sacrifice.

The Reverend Rachel Srubas, Pastor of Mountain Shadows Presbyterian Church in Tucson, begins her Lenten devotional *The Desert of Compassion*, with a metaphor by Trappist monk Thomas Merton. "There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid, and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion,"

As we journey through the wilderness of lent, may we let the deserts of hardship, pain, and struggle form in us a greater compassion for others and ourselves with which to color the world. The greatest temptation we experience in this desert is the temptation to turn inward and let hardship make us hard. Rather, let us embrace this calling to face the hard things of life, not knowing where they might lead. Let us walk on the rocky path in the hope that even as we are surprised by the colors of the bow in the sky following the rains, we will find light and color in the unexpected bloom of the deserts we journey.

During this Lenten Season, may we remember the light and color of the rainbow, the courage of Christ in the wilderness, the compassion that grows out of desert experiences, and the call to love all people across the spectrum. Amen