

# “Sign of Grace”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 11, 2022*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Genesis 8:6-12; 9:8-17

The biblical account of Noah and the Flood has been described as part children’s story, part apocalyptic tale. Because, even today, it is so well known, we will not focus on details such as how big the ark must have been, where all the animals would have fit, and what amounts of food they would need for their journey.

Flood stories were common in the lore of ancient cultures surrounding Israel, probably because it was a shared experience; or concern, at the least. Its proper genre is not history: we are not given a full account of what happened; but it is also not myth: this is not a parallel account to that of neighboring peoples. What matters is that it provides proclamation: it offers an announcement of what God does about a fractured, corrupted world.<sup>1</sup>

The author describes Noah’s time – the tenth generation of the human family which began in Eden – as violent and destructive: for “every inclination of their hearts” was completely evil. God is described not as angry, but aggrieved; not mad, but heartbroken. Thus, God decides to blot out all that has been created and start the project over. Everything, that is, except for Noah and his family; for even before destroying the earth, God is planning for its regeneration.

In the creation story, God brought order to a world of chaos, separating land, water, and sky. The Flood represents an un-creation: the water rises from the earth and falls from the sky so that the whole earth is immersed in it. Outside of the ark, no sign of life is to be found. But after a period of God’s wrath, God’s mercy is revealed. The rains stop and the waters begin to recede. Thus begins a period of re-creation in which order overcomes chaos – day and night; earth, sea, and sky can return.<sup>2</sup>

The first sign of grace emerges in the form of a dove. Or, more precisely, it is revealed through the relationship between Noah and the dove. Three times, we are told, Noah sends out the dove on exploratory missions. After the first foray, Noah extends his arm because the bird has found no place to set its feet. One week later, on its second trip, the dove discovers a leaf from an olive tree which it brings back to the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation Bible Commentary Series*

<sup>2</sup> Mark Throntveit from *WorkingPreacher.com*

ark, proving that the regeneration of the earth has begun. After another week, Noah again sends out the dove. This third time, the dove does not come back, which Noah understands to mean it has found a new home on dry land.

Up to this point in the story, about all we know about Noah is that he has been judged by God to be righteous – enough so to be chosen as the ark builder – and that he obediently follows God’s instructions. We may wonder why – when told by God that the earth was going to flood – Noah did not warn his neighbors; or, if he did, why they didn’t listen. The narration chooses to leave those questions unanswered. Here, in this story of the thrice-sent dove, we are allowed greater insight into Noah’s patience and judgement. Despite being made to wait longer than he probably wanted to, Noah was able to trust in the sign of grace – a single tree leaf – that God provided. The final evidence that the waters have receded is actually a lack of evidence; Noah has to trust that when the dove does not come back it (the bird as well as the earth itself) was now safe; that even after such a period of destruction, even when he could not see land, his future was bright.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging from the ark, knowing that the flood had ended, must have brought relief, but it would have been impossible to forget that everything else was now gone: that because God had been so heartbroken, the earth needed to start over. Noah’s home, neighbors, and everything else that had been familiar was gone.

But we are not told these emotions; Noah is not the subject of this story; God’s relationship with humanity is. After the flood waters are gone, God declares a covenant with all of creation. Never again – no matter what “inclinations of the heart” for evil that humanity may engage in – will God destroy the earth. Human nature – so often violent and destructive – has not changed, but God’s relationship with humanity has changed. No matter how broken-hearted God might grow, the commitment is now with the people more than the project.

And so, God sets a rainbow in the sky as a second sign of grace; as a reminder of this new covenant, this universal and timeless promise. As in English, the Hebrew word here also means “bow,” as in a bow and arrow. At the time, it was the world’s most technologically advanced weapon delivery system. What God promises here, then, is to disarm unilaterally, saying, “never again will the world be destroyed by a flood.”

The rainbow in the sky therefore functions as a double reminder: for God to remember the promise never to destroy again, and for humanity to recall that God’s commitment to mercy is stronger than God’s wrath. The rainbow also reminds us that

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

humanity has been charged with fostering conditions under which all creatures can flourish. We must ensure that natural habitats are preserved, and that our political, social, and religious institutions function to reign in human impulses to evil; and instead allow us to work together for good.<sup>4</sup>

Many of you, I'm sure, have seen the pictures of the beautiful rainbow that appeared over Buckingham Palace right before the announcement of Queen Elizabeth's passing. We're inclined to believe, I think, that phenomena like these are signs of God's grace, reminders that what takes place on earth has resonance in heaven. Although God established this universal covenant with humanity – a commitment to people over project; a promise never again to destroy despite what evil we might do – the choices that we make matter. Just as violence aggrieved God in the past, it breaks God's heart today.

Human evil – violence and destruction carried out against one another – is often the result of loss; it expresses grief when we don't know how to get back what has been lost any other way. The Russian invasion of Ukraine could be explained this way; a leader who still mourns the end of an empire is lashing out in an attempt to regain what has been lost. This same human instinct also plays out on a national and local level; when aggrieved (heartbroken), we desire nothing as much as to restore or regain that which has been lost. This can cause us to strike out against those who bring change and that which is different or new.

We certainly saw that human impulse emerge in the aftermath of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. Never before had such a threat become reality on our own shores. As we mourned the loss of life and our sense of security, the impulse grew to strike out against anyone who looked like, or practiced the same faith, as the terrorists. In a national attempt to band ourselves together in unity, we lashed out against undeserving targets.

In our modern world, the rainbow has many meanings. In addition to signifying God's promise to creation, it represents beauty in diversity. What appears in the sky, after the rain has ended, offers the full spectrum of color; no shade is unrepresented.

Not only does the rainbow prompt God to remember promises made, it also stirs within us the need to curb our human inclinations to harm and exclude. We know, in our hearts, that no rainbow is complete without every color. Likewise, our communities are enriched by the fullness of God's diverse, wonderful creation.

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Wright from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Therefore, as God's people, we commit ourselves to the work of welcome and understanding; of including others and reconciling differences.

October is our partner month with North Presbyterian Church. Located on the near east neighborhood of downtown Cleveland, North has long been a refuge and spiritual home for the homeless and housing insecure. After each Sunday worship service, a partner church provides a meal for congregation members, sometimes offering the best food and fellowship they will have that week.

Going to North always reminds me that – no matter who we are, what we do, or what we have – God loves each and all of us; and, also, that when any of God's children suffer, God's heart breaks. Thus, we are called to work to relieve and help bring an end to unnecessary pain and suffering, unjust systems, and human disconnection; and thus fulfill our end of the rainbow promise.

The story of Noah and the Flood proclaims that even if human nature has not changed, God's commitment to humanity does change. But looking back at this tale through a Christian lens, we can see that, through Jesus, a new understanding of the rainbow's meaning has been shared with us. Because God has so loved us – has shown mercy revealed as signs of grace – we are reminded of our call to love one another. Regardless of hue – nationality or faith tradition, level of income, education, opportunity, or privilege – we are united in and through our diversity and commonality as God's children.

We have been blessed by God's commitment to us as covenant partners; and we bless one another when we, too, hang our weapons of destruction – our hateful judgment, our harsh words, and our selfish indulgence – in the sky; when we commit instead to re-creation's ordering for a peaceful and abundant world. Amen.