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“Rainbows Adorn Nursery Walls”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Youth Sunday, May 22, 2022

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Holy Scriptures: Genesis 7: 1-5, 17-18; 8: 1-6, 20-22; 9: 8-16

Genesis 7: 1-5, 17-18

Next God said to Noah, “Now board the ship, you and all your family—out of everyone in this generation, you’re the righteous one. Take on board with you seven pairs of every clean animal, a male and a female; one pair of every unclean animal, a male and a female; and seven pairs of every kind of bird, a male and a female, to insure their survival on Earth. In just seven days I will pour rain on Earth for forty days and forty nights. I’ll make a clean sweep of everything that I’ve made.”

Noah did everything God commanded him.

The flood continued forty days and the waters rose and lifted the ship high over the Earth. The waters kept rising, the flood deepened on the Earth, the ship floated on the surface. The flood got worse until all the highest mountains were covered—the high-water mark reached twenty feet above the crest of the mountains. Everything died.

Only Noah and his company on the ship lived.

Genesis 8: 1-6, 20-22

Then God turned attention to Noah and all the wild animals and farm animals with him on the ship. God caused the wind to blow, and the floodwaters began to go down. The underground springs were shut off, the windows of Heaven closed, and the rain quit. Inch by inch the water lowered. After 150 days the worst was over.

On the seventeenth day of the seventh month, the ship landed on the Ararat Mountain range. Noah built an altar to God. He selected clean animals and birds from every species and offered them as burnt offerings on the altar.

God smelled the sweet fragrance and thought, “I’ll never again curse the ground because of people. I know they have this bent toward evil from an early age, but I’ll never again kill off everything living as I’ve just done. For as long as Earth lasts planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never stop.”

Genesis 9: 8-16

Then God spoke to Noah and his family: “I’m setting up my covenant with you including your children who will come after you, along with everything alive around you—birds, farm animals, wild animals—that came out of the ship with you. I’m setting up my covenant with you that never again will everything living be destroyed by floodwaters; no, never again will a flood destroy the Earth.”

God continued, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and everything living around you and everyone living after you. I'm putting my rainbow in the clouds, a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth. From now on, when I form a cloud over the Earth and the rainbow appears in the cloud, I'll remember my covenant between me and you and everything living, that never again will floodwaters destroy all life. When the rainbow appears in the cloud, I'll see it and remember the eternal covenant between God and everything living, every last living creature on Earth."

A Sign of the Covenant

Our young people chose the scripture and theme
for today's worship experience:

 Noah and the Ark, the Flood and the Rainbow of God.

Rumor has it that someone asked Noah if he did much fishing from the ark.
"How could I?" said Noah, "with only two worms?"

A Sign of the Covenant

The story of Noah and the ark and the rainbow of God
 begins with God seeing the stain of intentional sin,
 the stain of wickedness whenever neighbors mistreat neighbors.

We know about stains.

Are you like me,
 with more than a few favorite shirts that sport the stains of my favorite foods.

Allow me to wonder aloud why it is that when I stain a shirt
 the mark always seems to be something that won't come out.

The stain is right there, almost dead center,
 maybe just a little off so as not to be missed,
 so it would take one of my dad's super-wide ties
 to cover the stain.

And how about the "Catch 22" of stain removal?

Tough stains are possible to remove from a shirt or blouse.
You might consult Heloise for a great tip on what to do.
The remedy may be worse than the problem.
You might decide to wash your blouse over and over, again and again.
However, by the time the stain comes out,

all the colors and designs will be washed out along with the stain,
or the fabric will have disintegrated

Consider doing what I do:
live with the stain,
wear a sweater,
and promise your spouse you'll be more careful.

A Sign of the Covenant

In this morning's lesson from Genesis,
God recognized the stain in the human heart.

From Genesis 1 through Genesis 7
we are witnesses of the power and glory of a God of Nature.
The Bible tells stories and celebrates God's creative power to give life,
from setting the stars in the heavens to making oceans and continents,
from releasing birds to soar to making mammals that nurse their young,
from planting a garden with all one could need
to breathing the breath of life to make a human species.

God, who has the force of will and creative capacity to separate light and dark,
who established gardens, farms, herds of sheep,
has the power to summon storms and raise up a flood.

In Genesis 7, God gazed upon humanity and witnessed our forbearers' wickedness.
Angry, judgmental, frustrated,
God decided to act,
to wipe out human wickedness by wiping out humanity,
with the lone exception of one family, Noah's family,
whom God received as righteous.

God instructed Noah to build an ark,
to bring on board his family and animals,
to set sail and hold on tight
as the forty days and nights of rain pelted and covered the earth.

Interestingly, Noah kept the plan to himself.

Reminds me of the scene in the film "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas"
Grinch looks at his daily calendar to see what's on his agenda.

*"The nerve of those Who's inviting me down there, on such short notice
Even if I wanted to go, my schedule wouldn't allow it.
One o'clock, wallow in self-pity.
Four-thirty, stare into the abyss.*

*Five o'clock, solve world hunger.
Tell no one..."*

Like the Grinch, Noah tells no one.
He may not be perfect, yet the Lord works with the material at hand.

A Sign of the Covenant

After the flood waters recede and the ark is atop Mount Ararat,
Noah and the family give God thanks
for safe endings and new beginnings,
a fresh start,
a new hope in a new land.

Soon afterward Noah got drunk, removed his clothing, then fell asleep.
His son Ham modestly, quietly covered Noah with a blanket.
Upon awakening, Noah, in his embarrassment and anger,
cursed Ham and all his generations to come.
Not the best of parenting skills exhibited in the Bible.
Centuries later white racists picked out the cursed Ham to justify their prejudice.
You see, apparently Ham happened to have a different skin tone than Noah.
For centuries white people in positions of power
used this aspect of the story in the Holy Bible
to justify their prejudice and abuse of people of color.

My Lord and my God.

A Sign of the Covenant

God sees all.
God saw that even a mighty flood
did not cleanse humanity nor erase human wickedness.
God recognized that the stain in the human heart
was not bleached out by the flood waters.
It was going to take more than forty days and nights of rain
to wash away the stain of sin.
It was going to take a change of heart.
It was going to take grace.
And love.
And forgiveness.
And redemption.

God decided there needed to be a change of heart.

Instead of bringing down more death and destruction,
it is God who's heart changes.
God has a change of heart!
God recognizes the intrinsic value of life and of all creation.
God then establishes rainbows
as a sign of a covenant
that God will never, ever forget.
Rainbows remind us that we are known,
we are loved by God from the beginning
and will be remembered forever.
God remembers.

A Sign of the Covenant

Listen carefully once again to what God says in Genesis 9:

*"Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,
"Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you,
and with every living creature that is with you..."*

*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.
And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make
between me and you and every living creature that is with you,
for all future generations:
I set my bow in the cloud,
and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."*

Please make note of some key points in these words from above.

First, God establishes a covenant with all of creation.

Noah and his family are present, yet the covenant is made with all of creation.

God could have set the covenant only with Noah and his family,
or only with Israel, or only with the Chosen People.
Instead God made the ultimate statement of Inclusivity.
God said, *"This is something I want to do...
I make...a covenant between me and every living creature."*

There is but one race: the human race.
God loves us all, equally, unconditionally, beautifully.

Further, the covenant is made between un-equals.

This is not like a binding contract or an agreement or promise
between two equal parties.

This is between God and all the earth,
between the Creator and what is created."

Amazingly, God says, *"This is something I want to do."*

Finally, with extraordinary resolve,
God makes an irreversible commitment.

God now adds, *"Never again."*

What started the change, the movement toward wholeness,
wasn't anything about waters or floods, creation or humankind.

What changed is God's will.

God made a decision about the grief and trouble of God's own heart.

No one talked God into this change of heart.

God said, *"This is something I want to do."*

A Sign of the Covenant

Did you ever hear the story about the banker in Valdosta, Georgia,
and what happened when a local farmer walked into the bank?

The farmer told the banker he had some good news and some bad news.

"Let's hear the bad news first," said the banker, fearing the worst.

*"Well, you know the crop loan I've taken out from this bank
every year for the last ten years?"*

"Yes."

"Well, I can't pay it back. And you know the mortgage I've had on my land?"

"Yes."

"I can't pay it back either."

The banker was silent for a moment. "Well, let's hear the good news."

The farmer broke into a huge, pleasant smile.

"I want you to know that I'm going to keep on banking with you!"

Each rainbow is God's sign that,
in spite of our shortcomings,
despite the stains and sin in our hearts,
the Good Lord will continue to bank on humanity.

Expectant, excited parents and Sunday school teachers
paint rainbows on nursery walls.

When I was 15,

I painted a huge rainbow along the hallway of our apartment.
When I started clowning in a circus and juggling for fun and tips,
I wore bright rainbow suspenders.
Rainbow stickers and cards are shared and exchanged
as small signs of a Big Love, one grounded in beauty, hope, and joy.
Rainbows have been adopted by the LGBTQIA+ community
as a sign of acceptance, of love, of communal recognition
that all are loved, equally, by a God of Grace and Glory,
that all means all.
On a trip to Alaska our family witnessed a double rainbow arching across the sky.

Each and every rainbow is an amazing reminder that God remembers.

A Sign of the Covenant

Grace abounds.
Just as grace abounds, so, too, does human wickedness.
Sin is separation.
Sin is separation from God, from one another, from our true selves.
The stain of human wickedness and intentional wrongdoing
is within and among us.

Here is where I quit preaching and get to meddling.

Meanness, ugly acts, violence and hatred, insensitive words,
the posting on social media of hurtful, harmful, and hate-filled content
– all serve to impact our daily lives and relationships.
Some may think prejudicial jokes are funny.
Do you see the ones picked on laughing?

Here's a math equation that for some may seem elementary,
and for others may be hard to grasp, to understand at first hearing,
yet let it set a while, see what you think.

Prejudice Plus Power = Racism

Simplest, purest definition of a complex and cruel situation.

Prejudice Plus Power = Racism

People...

*[and if you perceive one finger pointing at you,
know that I'm pointing four fingers at myself]*

People with access and means to power and privilege
coupled with pre-judging neighbors based on race
are practicing racism.

It seems to many people as if God has once again released the flood waters.

How are we to respond to the wickedness of racism
that curdles our community?

What are we to do about systemic racism
in the form of voter suppression legislation in State Houses,
with abject violence, with racially motivated killing,
with mass murders from South Carolina to New Zealand,
from Atlanta to Buffalo?

Here is the question to those who live in fear of being “replaced”
by neighbors whom they mistreated for so long, for too long.
If you are afraid of being treated badly, why do it yourself?
If you are afraid of being treated badly, why do it yourself?

We have seen and are seeing what happens
whenever we don't take care of each other.

What happens when we do care,
when we are custodians of each other?

Each act of purity, of kindness, of building up one another
has an even greater effect.

Our congregation is beautifully, faithfully
sending out ripples of love in an affirming community.

No small task!

Look around at the rich rewards
as we foster healing relationships
share in conversations that matter
extend community service above self -- all for the glory of God!

A Sign of the Covenant

Clearly evil has not been eradicated from creation.
Stains continue to reside and fester in the human heart.

Be assured by the sign of the rainbow
that these events are not rooted
in the anger or rejection of God.

The relation of Creator to creation
is no longer in a scheme of retribution.

Our relationship with God and one another is grounded in love.
God proclaimed the value of all of creation and stands for it.
God proclaimed aloud a promise of hope: never again.

On the basis of that “never again”
God establishes the rainbow as a sign.
The rainbow is a promise to creation.
God remembers.

*“Is there anything that can keep us from being forgotten?” asked Paul Tillich.
That we were known from eternity
and will be remembered in eternity
is the only certainty that can save us
from being forgotten forever.
We cannot be forgotten, because we are known eternally, beyond past and
future.”* (Tillich, 1963, “The Eternal Now”)

There is hope in the covenant of God’s promise to love you.
God remembers you.
This hope is emblazoned above the clouds, on nursery walls, and in our hearts.

All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!