

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois  
February 22, 2015 Lent 1B

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell  
Text – Genesis 9:8-17

You know the camp and Bible school song, right? “The Lord said to Noah, there’s gonna be a floody, floody...Get those children out of the muddy, muddy...” and so on. It goes along with the sweet banners and models of arks and pairs of big-eyed animals that decorate church school classrooms and, yes, even some babies’ bedrooms. Well, God might have said something like that to Noah, but God also uttered one of the saddest phrases in the whole Bible. In the prelude to the flood, earlier in the Noah story, we read “the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on earth, and it grieved him to his heart...‘I will blot out from earth the human beings I have created – the people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”

“I am sorry that I made them.” What tragic words! From the very same Creator who delighted in the earth and the sky, the plant life and the creatures, its human beings made in God’s own image. All those things that God looked at and declared “good.” In just ten generations, God had gone from pure delight to disappointment at its wickedness – well, the wickedness of the humans. Creation had gone awry. It broke God’s heart! So, he selected one righteous family: Noah and his wife, their three sons and wives, instructed them to build an ark and populate it with a pair of each species. And then, God sent the flood and destroyed everything else. This is not a children’s story.

Now, we could spend a great deal of time pondering unanswerable questions: why didn’t God create good and obedient people in the first place? Why did God save Noah’s family instead of just starting over? We could do that, but I think we would miss the point. The point being the covenant God made with Noah after the flood subsided. The unconditional promise that never, never again will God cause a flood to wipe out the creation.

This year’s Lenten readings from the Hebrew Scriptures mostly have to do with covenants between God and God’s people. A series of covenants in different times and places and circumstances in the ancient world that give us glimpses of this one God and the relationships between God and people. Far too many of us grew up with the idea that we didn’t need to bother all that much with the Hebrew Scriptures – we heard that there was “an angry Old Testament God” of thunder and fire versus *our* “New Testament God” of love. We learned that the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, crucified, dead, and risen, superceded the Old Covenant of the Law.

And those very wrong notions persist, even now that our 1979 “*Book of Common Prayer*” calls for including readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in every Holy Eucharist. Because this is part of our story, our heritage, and familiarity with the stories with the overarching themes can only enrich and deepen our faith. Covenant is one of those overarching themes.

In the ancient Near East, covenants were legal documents that generally outlined mutual obligations between two parties who were often unequal in power. In two weeks, we will encounter such a covenant when we read the Ten Commandments. This covenant with Noah is quite different as is the covenant with Abraham that we will read next week. These are not agreements in which both parties must do something. These are promises from God – unconditional. Noah does not have to do anything – except to be fruitful.

I wonder what he and his family thought – after weeks and months with no dry land in sight, floating on the flood waters in an ark crowded with squawking birds, growling tigers, and trumpeting elephants, trying their best not to step on mice and frogs and earthworms. Then, at last, the waters recede, the dove flies off and does not return, and God makes the promise, placing the bow in the sky as a sign, an everlasting covenant to Noah and all creatures great and small. All creatures. All people. In what is a primordial story that precedes recorded history, there were no Israelites and Canaanites, there were no people of different races or ethnic backgrounds, or sexual orientation. Noah's offspring became the families that would be the forebears of all people, all other families, on earth. And God's promise was to all of these without exception.

But, the sign, the rainbow is not for us. It is for God! God set that bow – that weapon of battle – in the sky as a pledge to never wipe out the world again. And as a reminder of this promise. Hmm. A God who needs to be reminded. A God who suffers and grieves, had regrets, and changed! Makes you sit up and take notice of your images of God, doesn't it? Are we more comfortable with an immutable, distant God, an unchanging and solid rock, the one constant thing in our chaotic lives? Or is there room for a God who wants a relationship with us and knows our struggles?

The thing about the rainbow promise is this: it was not because God believed that all wickedness would be gone in this new creation of Noah and his family and the pairs of animals but because God knew it had not. Human nature had not changed. But God would now commit to sticking with creation in spite of its imperfection. God would continue to be disappointed and hurt, but would share in the pain of the world. And forgive.

Generation after generation passed. Other covenants were made. But they did not cancel out this everlasting promise to Noah and all creatures. It is a continuous story. And, one day, God intervened into human life again. No natural disasters this time, but a coming to us in human form, as Jesus of Nazareth, who taught us how to love God and one another. Jesus the Christ, the fulfillment of covenant.

Yet, still there are wars, and hunger and hatred among God's people. Still there are storms and forest fires that destroy. Not sent by God, but because of human nature – the lack of love for one another, neglect of our earth and its creatures.

Yes, the rainbow sign is for God. But we can look at it, too, this most beautiful manifestation of God's good creation. Even in our age of spectacular technology, a rainbow stops us in our tracks. We pause, look, call out to those around us and experience the joy and wonder of the bands of color arcing over the sea or the mountains, the plains or even the city. Perhaps part of their beauty is that they come after the rain – never without the rain. We ascribe many

meanings to rainbows—luck, as in the pot of gold at the end; that happy place over the rainbow where skies are blue and bluebirds fly; the light at the end of the long, hard storm.

So, what if, as we walk our Lenten path toward another sign—*the* sign of the cross, we follow God's example and let the rainbow remind us of God's promised—and also help us recall—and try to live--our own promises, our commitments? Our covenants to God and each other?

Amen.