

Riverside United Church
September 22, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 9: 8-17

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.’

Excerpt from A Song of Faith

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“How Does the Creature Say ... #3 Grace and Thanks”

I love rainbows. I love that a rainbow has become the symbol of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion. But, my love of rainbows goes back a lot further. A rainbow in the sky - partial, full or double - is a spectacular sight. It takes rain particles and light particles to mix and refract the light.

I remember several years ago I was on the Board of Camp McKay in the Qu’Appelle valley of Saskatchewan, and I was involved in a leadership training day. The group of leaders was divided into two different sessions in separate buildings. I was going between the sessions and I noticed a spectacular rainbow in the sky over the valley. Seizing this moment of the wonder of creation, I ran into one of the buildings, and when there was an appropriate moment said, “Hey everyone there is the most amazing rainbow outside!” No one moved.

I awkwardly backed out of the building, and yet undeterred went to the next building and went in and said, “Hey everybody there is the most amazing rainbow outside!” Everyone jumped up and came outside and there was a spirit of wonder and gratitude.

That was over 30 years ago and I still to this day don't know why there was such a contrast in the group responses. But I still seize the opportunity jump up and look at rainbows.

A rainbow in the sky is a natural gift of creation. A rainbow in the sky has powerful symbolism attached to it. I have a friend who is comforted by the sight of a rainbow as it is for her a sign of her deceased mother reassuring her.

Today in our reading from Genesis, we hear a story about the powerful symbolism of a rainbow - not primarily for Noah, not primarily for humanity ever since - but it is described as a reminder for God.

*“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.’”*

This covenant is at the end of the Noah story. We often think of Noah and the ark as a cute little story of the animals going on the ark two by two and there are lots of ideas and jokes about what it would have been like on the ark. There are many who take this story literally and there have been searches to try to find the remnant of the ark. This story is found in the early chapters of Genesis and the first 11 chapters of Genesis are not seen as history by credible biblical scholars. These pre-history stories are shaped and written to convey deeper truth.

Many of these stories come out of that exile period of the Hebrew narrative where identity and perspective were in great need of being shaped, reshaped, and transformed. So, it is quite a bold statement to hear that the promise of God has been that never again will there be a flood to destroy all flesh.

In a context where the Hebrew people have felt neglected and forgotten and punished by their God, it is important to be told that the covenant is not broken. Maybe there is a different interpretation of their current predicament - maybe God has not given up on them - maybe they shouldn't give up on God.

Maybe when they looked up at the sky and saw a rainbow they would remember that God is remembering. Maybe when they saw a rainbow and saw how the light refracted through the particles of water, they would remember that Holy energy was also at work in their lives. Maybe they would remember that death and destruction is not going to be the way of God, that death and destruction is not going to be the last word.

Today, we continue our creation season theme as we ponder our response as creatures to the gifts and dilemmas of living in this world. The third verse of the hymn God of the Sparrow, reads:

“God of the rainbow, God of the cross, God of the empty grave,
How does the creature say grace, how does the creature say thanks.”

A rainbow in the sky may remind us that death and destruction is not going to be the last word of God, and yet, we live with a lot of death and destruction.

- Friday night I attended a funeral visitation for the step-son of a long time friend - a 30 year old who died leaving a widow and three young children.
- We don't hear as much about the power of fires burning in our country and world as we did a few weeks ago, but the images of burnt out Jasper and other places are imprinted on our minds and hearts.
- We do see images of war and violence from Gaza, from Israel, from Lebanon, from the Ukraine, and don't hear as much from other conflicts around the world.
- We hear violent and polarizing language from political leaders and other sources that spread lies and fear.
- We live with realities of brokenness within families, with heartache over diminished abilities, with anxiety about future needs and directions.

There is a much that causes distress and woe and that tempts us to despair.

God of the rainbow, God of the cross, God of the empty grave ...

But our faith story does not leave us in the death and destruction. It does not deny that it is a part of life, but it reminds us that it does not have the final word. The flood and rainbow story is a major reminder of the hope that is part of the essence of the Holy. And in our Christian tradition, the cross and empty grave - the death and resurrection of Jesus - ground us in a hope that reminds us that life emerges out of death. And that truth isn't just about our physical deaths, but also experienced in a variety of ways in our lives and communities.

We have heard today a section from a Song of Faith that speaks of what we hold to be true about Jesus in the community of The United Church of Canada.

“By becoming flesh in Jesus,
God makes all things new.
In Jesus' life, teaching and self-offering,
God empowers us to live in love.
In Jesus' crucifixion,
God bears the sin, grief and suffering of the world.
In Jesus' resurrection,
God overcomes death,
Nothing separates us from the love of God.

The Risen Christ lives today,
present to us and the source of our hope.”

So amidst the difficulty, the death, the despair - we are reminded to remember the rainbow

promise and the resurrection truth. We are reminded to seek the glimpses of compassion and love that always permeate through the tough times. We are reminded that the creatures say grace and thanks.

We are invited to know those gifts as we live amidst the storms and walk in the valleys.

Yesterday some of us gathered at the Ravines to celebrate the life of Willy Marthaler. Prior to the public gathering, I had the privilege of being with the family for a short service in the chapel. As part of that time, I invited the family members to offer words that described Willy's life and character. One of the words offered was resilience, as her life included growing up during the war, moving twice to new countries, living with the death of her son, her husband, and her granddaughter. Through it she lived with a resilience of hope and faith.

On the radio this morning, I heard a story of a teacher who is working to teach strategies for building resilience in children with the increase in natural disasters. Maybe one of those strategies is to tell stories that tell eternal truths.

Our creation is groaning with the strain and weight of humanity's dominion over it. Our society and world is craving leadership and hope that is productive. We can do better than this.

We need an influx of grace - the gift of caring for one another and seeing in one another a human rather than mistakes, or labels or fear. Our created order needs renewal and restoration. There have been too many floods and fires and storms and the cycles of creation need a chance to give life anew.

We are invited to live with thanks - as our beginning point of response, so that selfishness and greed are kept in check and we are able to be partners in creation.

When we take time to notice creation we see wonder and majestic beauty and amazing gifts that plants and animals and sky and seas offer. We see how creation - when it is not disrupted - has cycles of renewal and rebirth. We marvel at how a seed can grow and a rainstorm can offer a rainbow.

We are invited into mystery and humility and with deep commitment to be find ourselves in God's ongoing story. A story illustrated by rainbows, crosses and empty graves. A story that speaks of grace and gratitude. Amen.