

Rainbows and Covenants

Genesis 9:8-17 CEB God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ "I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, ¹⁰ and with every living being with you--with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you. ¹¹ I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹² God said, "This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. ¹³ I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures. ¹⁶ The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every living being of all the earth's creatures." ¹⁷ God said to Noah, "This is the symbol of the covenant that I have set up between me and all creatures on earth."

1Peter 3:18-22 CEB Christ himself suffered on account of sins, once for all, the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous. He did this in order to bring you into the presence of God. Christ was put to death as a human, but made alive by the Spirit. ¹⁹ And it was by the Spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison. ²⁰ In the past, these spirits were disobedient--when God patiently waited during the time of Noah. Noah built an ark in which a few (that is, eight) lives were rescued through water. ²¹ Baptism is like that. It saves you now--not because it removes dirt from your body but because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God. Your salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who is at God's right side. Now that he has gone into heaven, he rules over all angels, authorities, and powers.

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We're going to look at two passages of scripture this morning and I'm going to suggest that we ignore part of one passage. More about that in just a moment.¹

The first verse of today's reading in First Peter speaks about the suffering of Jesus. Too often this has been twisted to claim that there is something holy and redemptive in suffering. Being impoverished, sick, or suffering from earthquake, wind, and fire does not make you holy or better in some way. Jesus suffered on account of sins, on account of the hypocrisy, the blindness, the greed, and the lust for power of the leaders of Israel who had sold their allegiance to Rome. Jesus suffered on account of Roman greed, Roman disregard for the plight of those they conquered, and the puffed up pride of Roman conquest. Jesus didn't lift up suffering as a virtue. Rather, he consistently relieved the suffering of those around him. Christ suffered at the hands of sinful people on our behalf, that is, he illustrated to us the righteous response to cruelty and to the suffering that was inflicted by the ungodly.

Verses 19 and 20 in this passage read, "And it was by the Spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison. ²⁰ In the past, these spirits were disobedient--when God patiently waited during the time of Noah." It's a rather cryptic statement and combined with a few other scattered verses there has been much speculation on what it possibly might mean. The material is complicated, its historical and religious background is uncertain, and the meaning is unclear. The early Christians lived in a world that was radically different from ours and some of their presuppositions can't be reconstructed with any confidence. But people have certainly tried to figure out what this passage refers to. Three options have been suggested: (1) Before his incarnation, Jesus preached to the

disobedient people of Noah's day. (2) Between death and resurrection, Jesus descended to the place of the dead and preached to the spirits of the evil people of Noah's time. (3) Between his death and resurrection, Jesus ascended to the realm of wicked angels (sons of God) who are mentioned in Genesis 6.

Genesis: chapter six. That strange passage says that, "2 The divine beings saw how beautiful these human women were, so they married the ones they chose. 4 In those days, giants lived on the earth and also afterward, when divine beings and human daughters had sexual relations and gave birth to children. These were the ancient heroes, famous men." This is the only place in the Bible where marriage or hanky-panky between heavenly beings and humans is mentioned. The very next verses declare that humanity had become thoroughly evil and God regretted making humans. (Verses 5 & 6) That is immediately followed by the stories of Noah and the flood. Now, out of these sparse verses, one can speculate - and fabricate large theories and huge legends. Over the centuries, that has been done. But speculation tends to become tradition and tradition can become doctrine and we can end up hanging our theological hat on a house of cards. It is a risky and misleading business.

Perhaps the only thing that can safely be said about Jesus "going and preaching to the spirits in prison" is that it shows the lengths that God will go to to reach out to we humans, whether we deserve it or not. Our God pursues us tenaciously!²

There are other parts of this passage in First Peter which are clearer and quite instructive. In the early centuries of the church, many people went through a long period of instruction in the faith, culminating in their baptism on Easter morning. This text was placed at this point in the lectionary because it speaks to the subject of baptism. Verse twenty-one says, "It [baptism] saves you now--not because it removes dirt from your body but because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God." The author is talking about converts, adults who are finding Jesus, responding to Jesus, soaking up the teachings and love of Christ. As their trust in Jesus grows, they reach a point where they are pulled by the change they experience, pulled by their conscience to respond in a public and physical way. They have begun to experience, feel, and trust the grace of God as taught and lived by Jesus and they declare this in the action of baptism. A sacrament is the outward expression of an inward grace and that is what is going on with new converts in baptism. It isn't about washing dirt from your body. By extension, it isn't about washing sin from your soul, either. Instead, baptism is the answer of a good conscience, the pledge, the response to God of one whose conscience has been moved and changed by a relationship with Christ.

It may seem like the leap from baptism in First Peter to today's text about the flood is a disjointed one. The author of First Peter does mention that Noah built an ark in which eight people were rescued, true, but at first glance that seems like the only connection.

There is a vast flood. To the people of the ancient Near East, a vast flood was seen as a return to the primordial chaos out of which the world had been created. In addition, the first nine chapters of Genesis tell how humanity can kill, rebel, lie, and otherwise act in ways that destroy both self and others. Humans themselves seemed determined to return to chaos! Our tradition tells us that God sends the flood to destroy the evil that was rampant in humans. And, too often we seem to stop there, seeing an angry God in every natural disaster. But the story continues.

God repents, God changes direction and turns from vindication to forgiveness, patience, and steadfast love for creation and humanity, despite the knowledge that humanity is weak and often, even eager, to sin. Humanity will not give up its sinfulness, indeed, cannot live in perfection. So God changes strategy. God is willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive. God establishes a covenant with Noah and all future humans. “I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done. ²² As long as the earth exists, seedtime and harvest, cold and hot, summer and autumn, day and night will not cease.” (Gen 8:21-22 CEB) The covenant with Noah is unilateral, unconditional, and multigenerational. It applies to all creatures, not just humans. God steps in and promises a fresh start and a certain future. The covenant to Noah is correctly understood as an early act of sovereign, undeserved grace. A gift. It requires nothing of creation. Noah never says a word.

God is a changed – and changing – God.³ The God of this covenant is unchanging only in refusing to give up on creation. God surrenders power, lets go for all time the right to destroy creation. God binds herself to the fate of humanity by promising not to give up on us. God becomes invested in our future and to that extent, becomes vulnerable. At the same time, God has promised that there will be a future!

Because we are promised that there will be a future, because God has promised not to destroy us, we can afford to be more honest about ourselves. We have the opportunity to take an honest and candid look at ourselves. We can admit our vices, our weaknesses, our pettiness, and our other failings without fear of instant retribution. We can rely on God’s nature to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. It is in God’s nature to save and to create and build up. And God seals the covenant with the rainbow as a reminder to God to not allow retribution and vengeance to reign.

Millennia later, God came in Christ to a chaotic and cruel world. Jesus didn’t confront power with power, but with love. He didn’t impose suffering on the guilty, but relieved the suffering of those being trampled on. He didn’t preach revenge, but forgiveness. His divine power wasn’t used to destroy, but to support and lift up.

After a bloody and horrible weekend of death when chaos ruled and Christ was crucified, we could well assume that the last chapter in the history of God’s grace and patience had come to a close. But instead, this “turned out to be the first chapter in a whole new story of promise. God came back, this time as the risen Christ, saying, ‘Brothers and sisters – and all you hurting, bloody, violent members of the human race – I love you yet.’”

We read today’s text in Genesis through the eyes of our own context. We live in a culture that tells us that the world is the result of our decisions, our actions, and our choices. Unfortunately, we have shown over and over that we as humans often fail to do the right thing and fall prey to greed, lust for power, short-sightedness, bigotry, and selfishness. We, too, seem determined to return to chaos.

Many dominant values and behaviors in North America and around the world are similar to the unconverted Gentile life of antiquity: idolatrous, unjust, violent, and even death-dealing. Are we, as the church, bold enough to bear witness to our Lord and challenge that?

We may wonder why God needs a rainbow to be a reminder of a promise not to give up on the human race. Think of the death and destruction that marked the past century – and the beginning of this one – and we can be grateful that God has a rainbow

to be a reminder not to give us what we deserve. Lord, keep your eye on that rainbow!
Amen.

Don't get distracted and caught up
in speculation about cryptic texts.
Dwell in and be secure in God's assurance
of a future with God's unshakeable love.

¹ There is a good possibility that First Peter wasn't written by the same Peter who walked with Jesus. That's because the Greek vocabulary and grammar of this letter seems to be better than you would expect from a Galilean fisherman. That's only important in that we want to avoid holding this letter in an exalted regard because we assume that Simon Peter wrote it.

² Besides, the interpretation of verses 19-20 isn't crucial for understanding the general thrust of the chapter or the epistle. Some of the proposed explanations, such as "the harrowing of Hell," assume that no one was saved until Christ died "for our sins." However, salvation occurs 68 times in the OT. **Isaiah 51:6-8 CEB** "6 Look up to the heavens, and gaze at the earth beneath. The heavens will disappear like smoke, the earth will wear out like clothing, and its inhabitants will die like gnats. **But my salvation** will endure forever, and my righteousness will be unbroken. ⁷ Listen to me, you who know what is right, people who carry my teaching in your heart: Don't fear human scorn, and don't be upset when they abuse you. ⁸ The moth will eat them as if they were clothing, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my righteousness is forever, **and my salvation for all generations.**" God offers and promises salvation throughout the Old Testament.

³ Only now, after the flood, does God explicitly permit people to eat meat. Killing animals is only for food (or to protect human life). All killing is now under divine scrutiny and regulation. Humans shall not kill humans because they are made in the image of God.