

February 21, 2021

**“Rainbows, Promises and Do-Overs”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

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.”

Psalm 25:1-10

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Mark 1:9-13

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Sermon "Rainbows, Promises and Do-Overs"

The lectionary readings this week are an odd collection of scriptures all meant to point us on the path toward lent. The theme for lent this year is covenant for the UCC. This scripture about Noah's ark is one about covenant. God makes a promise to us to never destroy us with water again.

We have heard this story all our lives. We were rotten and sinful so God wiped us off the face of the Earth but was gracious enough to save a handful of us and two of every animal. How very kind of him.

This was another one of those stories that got me in trouble with the Sunday school teacher. The precocious and pesky child that I was wanted to know what in the blazes did the animals do to deserve that, they weren't sinful but yet how many were swallowed up in the waters intended to purge the earth of it's human scourge.

And I had real trouble believing that all the humans were bad. There was a widely used Bible when I was growing up, "The Children's Illustrated Bible" that had a picture in it of the flood and off in the corner there is a man struggling to keep his head above water with utter panic on his face and a zebra doing the same her hoofs flailing in the storm.

I do not know how this story became such a commercial success. Think about it, all the pictures, the cookie jars of the ark, the cozy blankets and mobiles that hang over babies cribs and wallpaper trim.

If you were not raised up in the church and heard this story you would think "wow, God is quite the abusive parent". He threw a homicidal fit, drowns everyone, and then says "Oops sorry here's a rainbow. It's so pretty."

It doesn't wash for me. When I was in the seminary we heard a lot about covenant. The theologians wanted to repurpose this story and make it more about the rainbow rather than the flood, more about the promise, than the rage of God. But that just doesn't wash.

It is a horrible story. An ancient myth created to somehow explain a really bad flood once in human history and so it went from generation to generation. If I were God I would please say “people stop telling this story you’re making me look bad!”

But like all biblical stories that we are kind of stuck with at this point there are fundamental truths in it whether I want to admit it or not.

I remember a particularly hard day of parenting with my daughter, my stepdaughter for those of you who need family to fit in boxes. By the end of the day we were exhausted from the struggle of her not wanting to do anything she was told to do and not being able to take no for an answer. She was such a beautifully sensitive and stubborn child. This particular day the power struggle was real. There was yelling, and crying, and threats.

I remember at some point I heard a little inner voice say “This is not the way with her, it will never work. This trying to assert my will over hers is a failed endeavor. The only way I am going to help her become the person she is capable of being is through love and through example. I can’t say things went swimmingly from there but every time I felt my anger rise up I would hear that voice say. “This is not the way.”

That really hard day of crying and screaming and threatening and her kicking the back of my seat in the car. That day, I made a covenant with her in my heart to try and not ever make our relationship about having power over her actions but more about trying to love her, guide her loosely, and show her in my actions what a loving human being looks like. I know I failed on a daily basis, but I also know that she is now one of the best human beings that I know. And I learned more about unconditional love from her than I have anyone.

As much as I hate to admit it the story of the ark depicts this same dynamic of God coming to understand exactly how to love us.

There is also another part of this story I resonate with. It’s that starting over again for humanity. That day when they step from the arc on dry land, out of their isolation and the musty smell of a ship full of animals.

It is the beginning of a major do over for them. Starting over from scratch, doing it better this time. Quite an image for us as we emerge from the isolation of our homes and come together, ready to begin again.

And also what I have come to know about God is that in my life I have more than once been given a fresh start, where the transgressions of my youth like the psalmist talked about were forgiven. I have been given do overs by God, time and time again because of God's love and forgiveness, they don’t run out!

I have also certainly been moved by God to give others do overs in their relationship with me. This is what love looks like. What relationship looks like. What covenant looks like. When you love you can let go of a multitude of little wrongs because you can trust the person has good intentions.

They may mess up, say the wrong thing, be distracted, be grumpy-- but you know that love will get you through. THAT kind of covenant I can understand.

The story of Noah's ark to the story of Jesus does illustrate the evolution in human understanding of who God is. The stories of God start to change as people start to understand God more. And yes then you can land at a place theologically of understanding covenant, that God holds us loosely while we find our way to God. That we are gently tethered to God as God's beloved.

The more we know from science the less we have needed stories that explain natural phenomena. But we still need the stories of who God is now, in this time and place. We still need to share stories of our faith that help us to cope, get through, get over.

We need to hear stories like the African American delivery driver in Texas whose truck slid into the flowerbed of a wealthy white couple's home when she was delivering their groceries and for five days they sheltered her, fed her, and became friends with her because there were no tow trucks that could get to them.

There are still plenty of stories out there everyday to show that God is still with us, still loving us, still giving us do overs and rainbows, still keeping a covenant with us to love us no matter what.

Lent is about rediscovering that gentle tie. Lent is about renewing that connection and recommitting to try and be our best selves.

When I speak of our best selves, I am never talking about, losing those extra pounds or giving up anything. Lent isn't about less, it is about more. I am talking about loving more, living in gratitude more, living with an open heart more and loving ourselves and God more.

I am not someone who believes in "a Devil" per se that is going to sit with you in your wilderness times and tempt you, but I most certainly do believe that *there are temptations in this life that will rob you of your joy and cloud your connection to God.* Jealousy and envy, self pity, blaming others and holding onto petty resentments, these are just some of the pitfalls we can fall into that will get us off that path of peace. When this happens, go pray for a while, like Jesus, except forty minutes not days should do it, just tug on that tie, say *God pull me back in a little so that I can find the path again,* so that I can find love for humanity and myself again.

Some days it's hard. Like the God in this ancient story, we are all capable of fits where we want to throw the whole lot of them out. Humans stink, life is too hard. But it simply isn't true. There is far more decency in most of us than there is the other stuff, we are worth saving.

For every person on Facebook spouting off the ugly. There are people landing rovers on Mars, figuring out how to feed the hungry and keeping people warm. There is a lot more love down here than meanness, you just have to keep your heart and eyes open for it, and if you don't see enough of it then be the change and love those around you even harder.

However you decide to spend this Lenten journey I pray that by the time we get to Easter you feel closer to God than ever, that you feel more like God's beloved than ever, *that your heart opens wide and the world around you is flooded with God's love through you.* May it be so.
AMEN

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