

WGUMC March 1, 2015 Genesis 9:8-17 "Rainbows"

The Chumash Indians of Southern California tell a story about how they got from Santa Cruz Island, one of the Northern Channel Islands, to the mainland long, long ago. The Chumash say that they were created on the island, sprouted from seeds of a magic plant deposited there by the Earth Goddess, Hutash. Life was harsh on the island. But after her husband, Sky Snake, sent down the lightning and gave the people fire, they started living better and having more children.

In time the island got so crowded that the noise from all the people kept Hutash awake at night. She was determined to have some peace and quiet, so she decided that some of the people would have to leave. They would have to go to the mainland where there were no people. But how would she get them there? Hutash had an idea. She made them a colored bridge in the sky, a rainbow, so they could cross from the island to their new home. Unfortunately, some of them got

dizzy being up so high in the clouds and slid off the rainbow into the ocean. Hutash took pity on them and turned them into dolphins.

Many, many cultures have legends about the origin of rainbows. Jews and Christians have their own version in Genesis Chapter Nine. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are called the prehistory or primeval history, which means they are not and were never meant to be regarded as historical. They were meant to be regarded as true, which is not the same thing. The early chapters of Genesis are mythical. As my Bible puts it: "The primary purpose of the book...is not to present straightforward history but to tell the dramatic story of God's dealings with the world..." [Oxford NRSV]

We have in the tale of Noah a story that is every bit as dramatic as the legends of the Native Americans. And, for those who hold the Bible to be sacred, the story couldn't be more true. Today we have only the happy ending of the story

of the great flood. (By the way, there are legends of floods in just about every culture, too.) Here at the end of the story, the floodwaters have finally receded, the earth has dried, and Noah and his kin and all the animals have left the big boat that has been their home for almost a year.

The first thing they do is build an altar. Then they take some of the surplus animals—the sheep and cows weren't just playing checkers on that boat—and they offer sacrifices of thanksgiving to God. Chapter Eight says that the odor coming from the burning altar is pleasing to God and God makes a decision: "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." [Genesis 8:21-22]

In this dramatic moment, God accepts the reality of the human condition. God accepts that the human part of the creation is going to go on messing it up for everything else. And God decides that God is going to keep this show going regardless. No matter what we do, God is not going to give up on this world just because we humans have a tendency to.

What Matthew Fox calls the "original blessing" in the Garden of Eden was rejected by the original humans. Even so, God prepares to bless us again. God is not going to wait for us to get our act together. God is going to take the initiative to establish a covenant, not just with Noah and his descendants, but also with all those creatures whose lives are inextricably bound up with ours. This is a universal covenant. It is not with just one tribe or one species. This covenant is with the entire creation.

You know this makes God the first environmentalist. And in the ninth chapter of Genesis, God passes the first

environmental protection act. The story tells us that the flood came because of human sin. But not only humans suffered for it. Every living thing that wasn't on that ark was wiped out. But God is not going to do it again. "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." [Genesis 9:11] WE may destroy the earth with our nuclear weapons, our toxic chemicals, our energy consumption, but God is done with the destruction. And to prove it to us, God has put a sign in the sky. God gives us a rainbow.

John Wesley called rainbows "coloured rain, or the edges of a cloud gilded." He said, "The rainbow appears when the clouds are most disposed to wet; when we have most reason to fear the rain prevailing, God [shows] this seal of the promise that it shall not prevail." [Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*]

Actually, the text says that the sign is not so much for us as it is for God. God says, "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant...." and I won't let the waters destroy the world ever again. [9:14-15]

It's hard to believe that this August will be ten years since Hurricane Katrina just about destroyed the Gulf Coast. Over 1800 people died, more than a million people were displaced and more than \$100 billion in property damage was done. The people in the Gulf States must have been wondering whether God had forgotten the covenant when Katrina destroyed much of their world.

In New Orleans, the floodwaters hung around for weeks. But as the emergency supplies began arriving and rescue teams started working and donations started flowing and an army of volunteers started serving, gradually the rainbow appeared.

Wesley said, "The rainbow appears when one part of the sky is clear..." The Gulf Coast had a long way to go. Only one part of the sky was clear, but that little bit of sky let in a little bit of light. And it only takes a little bit of light to produce a rainbow to reminds us that God's mercy comes to us in the midst of devastation.

Here on the west coast, we are in the middle of a bad drought. We haven't seen a rainbow for a while and the only thing we are flooded with is fear. What does the future hold for us here? Is this what climate change looks like for California? Scientists from NASA and Columbia and Cornell Universities have just published new research that says that there is an 80% chance that we will experience a mega-drought—one that lasts at 35 years or more—before the end of the century. We may not live to see it, but our children and grandchildren will. A flood destroyed the biblical world. Could a drought of biblical proportions destroy ours?

Our worries about the weather are not the only thing reaching flood stage these days. The population is, too. There has been a flood of people coming into the Valley. But there isn't enough housing for the people who are already here. Plus, they are bringing cars, so our freeways are flooding.

It's no wonder that folks have to build all kinds of levees—mental and spiritual levees—in order to withstand the hurricane-force stresses of life in the Valley: lack of affordable housing, loss of funding for schools and road repair, longer workdays, longer commutes, less time for family, no time for God. The pressure can be so great that if any storm ever came along, those levees would break.

It's been another warm, dry winter, but it's been raining funerals around here, eight since October. We had three deaths in just ten days in January. So when I got the call from Loveland that my dad had fallen and broken his pelvis, I could feel the levees starting to break. In the midst of trials and

tribulations, it was the worst possible time to go away but I knew I had to. When I got on the plane for Colorado, I was so tired and numb, I don't even think I felt the takeoff.

But I had chosen a window seat at the back of the plane and it was a magnificent clear day over the Sierras and most of the Great Basin. We ran into some clouds over the Rockies. And as we began our descent into Denver, I noticed that the sun above was casting a shadow of the plane on the clouds below. Then I saw something I've never seen before. I had to look again to make sure my eyes were working. There were rainbow-colored halos around the plane's shadow, almost as if God's promise was surrounding my plane.

Later, I looked it up to see what it was. It's caused by the sun's light reflecting off of droplets of water in the cloud and it creates a halo around the shadow of the observer's head, in this case, the plane. This optical wonder is called a *glory*. I like that. I needed that.

I needed to see the bow in the clouds because I needed a reminder of God's promise to protect and sustain us. For when I got to Colorado, I got another flood of bad news: the verdict was guilty, Joyce was in ICU, and I had another funeral to do. But it was OK, because my eyes had seen the glory. And I want you to be able to see it, too. Whenever the hurricane is howling and the floodwaters are rising, look up and trace the rainbow through the rain until you can remember that God's promise is not vain. This is the only thing I know: God is the love that will not let you go.