

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
2 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-13

In today's Old Testament lesson, we encounter God's covenant with Noah and his sons. The backdrop to this covenant is Genesis 1-11, which is the story of the origin and spread of human sin, culminating in the great flood which destroys the earth and its inhabitants.

The downward spiral begins back in chapter 3, describing how sin creates disharmony between human beings and God, human beings and one another, and between us and the entire creation.

By the time we arrive at chapter 6, the language of the text is both raw and poignant. We are told: "And God saw that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil, continually" (6:5-6). We are further told: "God was sorry that He had made humankind on the earth, *and it broke his heart*" (v.6, emphasis mine).

Can you imagine a pain, a brokenness, a poison so pervasive that it caused the Creator of the universe *to regret the act of creating it*? The Genesis text tells us that God's heart was so broken at the pain and rebellion of His creation and His creatures that He sent a flood to destroy everything.

But how does God do this? Does God wipe out the entire creation and then just walk away?

When my sister Becky was little, she was drawn like a magnet to mud puddles. If there was mud, or a mud puddle, within striking distance, she would find it. She would find it, welcome it, and become friends with it.

I don't remember the exact details, but one time we had been to a wedding reception. We arrived home in our nice clothes, and Becky made her way to a mud puddle near the house. By the time my mom came to check on her, she found Becky covered from head to toe, dressed now not just in her finest, but in her muddiest.

Was my mom angry? Absolutely. But what did my mom do? Did she walk up to Becky and strike her dead on the spot?

No. She grabbed her daughter by the hand, led her into the bathroom, ran the tub full of water, and washed her clean of her muddy mess.

And when God saw that the thoughts of our hearts were continually evil, did God just blow up the whole mess and walk away?

No. God cried an ocean full of tears from a broken heart, and He used those tears to give what He had made a bath, so that a new beginning could be made. The whole creation was recreated and given a new beginning, a chance to live once more in harmony with God.

In the story of the great flood, it was not humanity or the creation that was the great loser. It was *God* who was the great loser. The flood waters that covered the earth were not so much God's judgment as they were the flood of God's tears, a torrential downpour of God's sorrow for a world gone terribly wrong.

Which leads us to our text today, and God's covenant with Noah and his children. Now in most cases where you have a biblical covenant there are at least two parties involved, and both parties make promises or commit to something. Party A promises one thing, and Party B promises another thing in return.

But this covenant seems to be entirely God's doing. God enters into this covenant with creation without requiring anything in return. God promises never again to destroy the creation with a flood. And as a sign of this promise, God places the bow in the clouds.

Have you ever wondered why God choose the *rainbow* as the sign of His promise here?

One Old Testament scholar offers an interesting take on it:

Ancient depictions of a deity armed with bow and arrow are not unusual [in the ancient near east]. The sign of God's covenant, God's bow in the clouds, is precisely the bow of battle. To hang up one's bow, then, is to retire from battle. That bow in the clouds is the sign of God's promise that whatever else God does to seek our restoration, destruction is off the table. (Elizabeth Webb, *WorkingPreacher.org*, February 26, 2012)

At first, I was a bit puzzled by these words, because I had never thought about it in this way. But then I thought about Jesus, and these words began to make more

sense. I began to see a God so grieved and heartbroken by our sin that He sent a flood, and that same grief then led Him to seek another way to get through to us.

The flood did not cleanse the human heart of sin, and God knows that. And yet God enters into covenant with us anyway. God is committed to seeking us out, to restoring us to Himself. But the rainbow in the sky that we see from time to time is a reminder to us that God has laid down his arms. God's plan is to *love* us into restoration.

Author Walter Wangerin had a young son named Matthew who loved comic books. His love was so strong that his parents had to limit his intake of comic books so that he would read something of more quality.

One day Matthew's parents discovered -- hidden away in Matthew's room -- stacks upon stacks of contraband comics. They discovered that they were all from the public library, and they had not been checked out, but stolen!

Matthew's parents lectured him about honesty and stealing, and made him return the books to the library and confess what he had done. They hoped and prayed that this was the end of the story.

But a year or so later, they discovered more contraband comics in their son's room. This time they learned that the stolen comics had been taken from a convenience store near the family's vacation cabin several states away. It wasn't realistic for Matthew to return the books, so this time they piled them all in a heap

and burned them. Again, mom and dad hoped and prayed that this was the end of it, and that their son had learned his lesson.

But before long, they found yet more stolen comics in Matthew's room.

His parents were now desperate to get the message across. Matthew's dad took him into his office, and gave the boy a serious spanking.

Then he said to the boy: "You sit here and think about what you have done and what will happen to you if you do not overcome this."

Then the father went outside, closed the door of his study, leaned against the wall in the hallway, and wept. He wept because of what he had done. And he wept because of what the future might hold for his son.

Years later, Matthew had grown up and moved away. He returned home for a visit, and at one point the issue of his stolen comic books came up. Matthew's mom asked him about it, and he said: "You know, mom, after dad spanked me that time in his study, I never stole again."

She asked, "Was that because dad spanked you?"

Matthew replied: "No, it was because after he left the room I heard him sobbing in the hallway. I knew I could never steal anything again." [From *Lectio*

Homiletics, 14:2, p. 43]

The story of the flood is the story of a God who sits in the corridors of time and weeps at our brokenness and our failures. Anytime you or I fall into sin or choose misguided paths, God still weeps. When we hurt others or ourselves,

God's heart breaks. We fail -- God weeps.

On this first Sunday in Lent, the question is: *Why do we observe Lent?* Why do we set aside time in an attempt to regain spiritual focus? Why do we spend more time in reflection, prayer, and the giving of ourselves?

We observe Lent not to get on God's "good side," or to curry God's favor, or to abase ourselves or despise ourselves. **We observe Lent because we can hear God crying in the hallway.** Crying for the world He made, and for us.

But the story does not end there. For the sign of the rainbow is God's sign to help *Him* remember never to abandon us in our sins. The rainbow is a sign which reminds us of the lengths to which God is willing to go to save us. The rainbow is a sign to us and to all of creation that God's grace is greater than our sin. God's love is deeper than our rebellion.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, let us come as those who are fully conscious of our own sin and its destructive consequences. But let us also come as those who recognize in the rainbow God's commitment to *love* us back into His arms.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.