

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 22, 2015
First Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

During the season of Lent, it can be easy for us to focus on *ourselves* – on our practices, our disciplines, those things we are “taking on” and those things we are “giving up.”

But has it ever occurred to you that *God* practices a Lenten observance? I’m here to tell you this morning that God most assuredly does.

The Old Testament lessons during the first three weeks of Lent focus on *covenants*. In the ancient Near East, covenants were legal documents, cementing a relationship of mutual obligation, usually between a greater power and a lesser power.

For example, a conquering kingdom might covenant not to destroy a losing kingdom, as long as the losers promised to fight against the conqueror’s enemies and to support the conqueror with troops and supplies. The obligations are reciprocal, but the power dynamics are not always equal.

The covenant we see today – God’s covenant with Noah – does not look anything like the typical covenant. For starters, the covenant is not just with Noah

alone, or even Noah's family. The covenant is made with "every living creature." God commits not just to all of humanity, but to all of creation.

Second, this covenant does not involve the usual legal reciprocities. Instead, all of the obligations rest with God. This is actually more of a *promise* than a covenant. We might say that God reaches out to the world, and God does all of the heavy lifting.

Before we examine this covenant, though, we need to see what has happened to lead to it. You remember, don't you? It was the Great Flood. Early in the narrative of human history, we get these distressing words from Genesis 6:

As far as God was concerned, the earth had become a sewer; there was violence everywhere. God took one look and saw how bad it was, everyone corrupt and corrupting – life itself, corrupt to the core... God saw that human evil was out of control... God was sorry that he had made the human race in the first place; it broke his heart. (Gen. 6:3ff, The Message)

Can you imagine a world so violent, so bloodthirsty, so broken that the Creator *regrets the act of creating it*? (This is why we pray the Great Litany today. The heart of God is broken – and you and I helped to break it.)

So, God looks around, and sees nothing but evil, violence, and bloodshed. And here is the \$64,000 question: *How does the justice side of God respond to this kind of world?*

The answer, here in Genesis 6, is that God responds *to violence with violence*. God said: "I'll get rid of my ruined creation, make a clean sweep:

people, animals, snakes and bugs, birds – the works. I’m sorry I made them.”

(Gen. 6:5ff)

But after a clean sweep, subsequent history will find the world back in the same old mess. Which leads us to our text and God’s covenant here with Noah. As I said earlier, in this covenant, it is God who does all the heavy lifting. The onus is all on God. God’s promise to Noah and to his descendants, and to the entire creation is that He will never send another flood to destroy the earth and its inhabitants.

And with the promise comes a sign: *the rainbow*. God says, “when I send clouds over the earth, the rainbow will be seen in the clouds, *and I will remember my covenant with you and with everything that lives. Never again will there be a flood that will destroy all life.*

Do you see what is happening? The rainbow is the sign of the covenant, but the rainbow is not for Noah and his descendants. *The rainbow is a reminder to God.*

God’s first response to the violence and brokenness of the world was to respond in kind, to wipe everyone and everything off of the planet. But with this promise to Noah, something has dramatically changed. *God is giving up something for Lent.* God is giving up the option of destroying us all with water. God is giving up the option of responding “in kind” to the world’s violence and

sin. *The rainbow is the sign that reminds God of his promise to find a different way of responding to our sin and rebellion and brokenness.*

Have you ever wondered why God chose the rainbow as the sign of his promise to Noah? One Old Testament scholar offers this reason:

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*, Feb. 26, 2012)

It is easy for us to read the story of the great flood in Genesis and to conclude that human kind was the great loser. But we would be mistaken. God was the great loser in all of this.

The flood did not cleanse the world of sin. And yet God enters into covenant with us anyway. God is committed to seeking us out, to restoring us to Himself. And the rainbow that you see in the sky from time to time is a reminder *not so much to us, but to God* – that God has laid down His arms. And in a move that amounts to the utmost cost, God's plan of responding to our sin now is to *love us into restoration.*

For centuries we've labored under the crass stereotype that the God of the Old Testament is a vengeful God of wrath, while the God of the New Testament is a God of love and mercy. Anyone who still believes that should spend some time

in Genesis 9. Better yet, they should cast a glance at a fresh rainbow after the next rain.

As our Lenten journey begins, it is normal to call to mind practices or disciplines we have chosen to observe as we seek to draw closer to Jesus. But as you do so, remember God's promise to Noah. Remember the rainbow. The rainbow is God's sign to help God 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.

As you come to the Table this morning, remember that the Lenten journey is *not about us*, but about *God* and His great love for us. It is about the God who has tempered justice with mercy. And the sign to us of that reality is not merely a rainbow – it is a man walking into the wilderness on his way to Jerusalem.

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