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February 21, 2021

Psalm 25:1-10

Genesis 9:8-17

THE EVERLASTING COVENANT

Do you remember seeing rainbows as a child? After a long rain, the sun comes out and there it is – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Whether one is six or ninety-six, the image hanging in the sky can evoke a sense of awe. After the last couple of weeks, I've been looking up to see if there might be a snowbow in the sky, marking an end to a deluge of snow. I actually looked it up to see if there is such a thing as a snowbow. The answer is 'no' because snowflakes don't have the same curvature found in droplets of water that refract the sunlight when the angles are just right. Even so, I hope the deluge is over.

When we know the biblical story of the rainbow, to see one can evoke even a deeper sense of awe because it is a reminder of what is called an everlasting covenant that God made with Noah and others at the end of the story of the great flood. Earlier in the story, the picture comes to mind of a big barn-looking ship full of animals floating on a choppy sea. We're happy to tell that part of the story to the children, but we are uneasy about the part of the story where God wiped out all but a handful of humans and animals on the planet. Is that the same God we worship?

It's a bit like a part of the Abraham and Isaac story, where Abraham understands that God is commanding him to take his beloved son, Isaac, to sacrifice him as a burnt offering, until the moment when Abraham takes the knife and raises it over his son only to be stopped by an angel. Some have said that Abraham was part of a culture where child sacrifice as a religious rite was commonplace, and he only began to understand the true nature of God when he realized that sacrificing children was far from what God wanted to happen. In a similar way, it may be that the Noah story reflects the early cultural understanding that God used nature as a way to carry out divine punishment and it is only at the end of the story that a clearer understanding of God is revealed, that God is One who protects rather than destroys. The covenant that God makes with Noah and his descendants indicates that God is our ally, not our enemy. Yes, bad things happen to us at times in natural

disasters, but the covenant is our assurance that none of them is rooted in God's ill will toward us. The creation is cherished by the God who made it. At a time when the main weapon used to kill was a bow and arrow, the story presents a revelation where we see God's multi-colored rainbow turned away from humanity and creation itself.

The story keeps mentioning this word 'covenant' which is a pledge of strong and enduring relationship. God makes a promise to never again wipe out so much life through a flood. The promise is not only between God and humanity, but is between God and all of life found on earth, and with the earth itself. We expect there to be conditional language in the story, but it's not there. No specific human response is spelled out as required for the divine promise to be kept.

However, just because there are no conditions listed in this covenant does not make us merely recipients of it. Earlier in Genesis, we as humans are identified as creatures made in the image of our Creator, which makes us partners in God's plan. We too are called to be allies, even stewards of creation. We have full opportunity to be not just lovers of God, but also to be lovers of the life God has created and placed within our care. As such we seek to recognize that we too are wounded by the brokenness we see around us, the brokenness in which we ourselves participate. By God's grace, we have been placed into a loving and caring relationship of the created order by a God who calls us to shift the balance from death to life whenever and wherever we can.

There is an urgent need for us to understand that covenant and our role in it these days. Scientists understand clearly that human activity of emitting greenhouse gases has vastly changed the makeup of earth's atmosphere. This is leading to climate change that has already led to the extinction of many species. If the human activities that lead to climate change go unchecked, it will make the planet must less livable for future generations of animal inhabitants, including humanity. A peer-reviewed scientific study published a week ago projects that one-third of all animal and plant species on the planet could face extinction by 2070, just 49 years from now. ¹

A few years ago, our family got to travel to the city of Rome. While there we went to St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican and got to see Michelangelo's great marble sculpture, The Pieta, which depicts the lifeless body of Jesus on the lap of his mother, Mary, after the crucifixion. We looked at the masterpiece through a bulletproof acrylic glass panel because 49 years ago, a mentally-deranged man, while shouting, "I am Jesus Christ," attacked the masterpiece with a hammer. He broke off Mary's arm, and knocked off a chunk of her nose before bystanders grabbed him to halt his destructive acts.² Thankfully the artistic work could be painstakingly restored.

It's not that we as humans are purposefully trying to wipe out a long list of animal and plant life on God's masterpiece creation of earth. It's not like we are declaring ourselves to be God and swinging a hammer. Yet we are failing in our role as stewards of the artistic created order when we follow the strong cultural norms to ignore the disfigurement taking place. The vast and lasting impact of our action and inaction could well get to the point where we are moving once again to a similar culture which Abraham encountered, where the sacrifice of our children's well-being and perhaps their very lives is viewed as normal.

You and I have entered a forty day period called the season of Lent. It is a time of preparation for Holy Week and Easter. It is a time that offers spiritual enrichment. It is a time where we can regain clarity about our human identity and purpose as those in covenantal partnership with God to care for, not disfigure the created order of the greatest of all artists. We know our ark isn't a barn floating on a choppy sea, but rather is a fragile planet hurtling through the vast ocean of space. If the destructive waters rise in times to come through vast climate change, it won't be because of divine fiat, but because of our crazed sense that we own the world instead of us rightly serving as caring stewards of God's creation. The next time you see a rainbow, whether it is a human artist's rendition of one or the divine artist's version hanging in the sky, let it be a reminder of the gracious covenant God made with all of the living creatures in our world that shows us God's deep care for the created order, a deep care that we are called to reflect as caretakers made in God's image.

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/02/14/climate-change-study-plant-animal-extinction/4760646002/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/22/archives/pieta-damaged-in-hammer-attack-assailant-with-hammer-damages-the.html>