

“After the Flood” – Genesis 9:8-17

A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork, Associate Minister
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church
February 21, 2021 – First Sunday in Lent

Creator God, let us pause in wonder this day and consider the beauty, mystery, and majesty of your creation. As we enter into this season of Lent, may we do so with open and willing hearts to see what wisdom and grace this journey toward Easter will offer us this year. And, as always, may your Holy Spirit guide us this day and all days. Amen.

Genesis might seem to be a strange place to begin this season of Lent. But this familiar story of Noah and his ark full of animals, the great flood, and the rainbow promise of God serves an important foundational role in the scriptures of our faith tradition. This is the first time in the Bible that God’s relationship with humanity and all creation is framed as a covenant.

And it is certainly not the last. In fact, in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word covenant appears 323 times. This covenant God makes with Noah is only the beginning of an ongoing relationship between God and the world that will continue to unfold, be strengthened and rearticulated, challenged and strained at times, and yet ultimately endure.

Later in Genesis, God will extend this covenantal promise to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. In the Exodus story, God will remember this covenant and lead Moses and the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and give them the commandments and laws they need to live into this covenantal relationship. When the people will need guidance and correction along the way, the prophets of ancient Israel will remind them yet again of this covenant and call them to hold up their end of this relationship. Jesus would also speak of it at the Last Supper in his promise of grace, forgiveness, and presence. And all who followed throughout the centuries who claimed both Jewish and Christian faith traditions would continue to strive to uphold and understand this covenant in their own time.

And it all began with a rainbow.

The ancient Israelites are not the only Near Eastern culture to have passed down a story of a great flood. There are others as well. Whether or not there was ever a flood that wrought such widespread devastation, the people of that time certainly knew what floods could do, just as we do. They knew of the danger and destructive power. And so, for the ancient world, a flood that would wipe out all creation was one of the worst things imaginable. Water, such a necessary thing for life, is also a powerful, uncontrollable force of nature. The ancient peoples of this world knew of its power and knew of their own vulnerability.

In some ways they may have been wiser and humbler than us. The modern world sometimes has a tendency to think that our technology can always save us. Sometimes it can. Sometimes it can't. Nevertheless, there is wisdom in understanding and respecting the power of nature.

The story of the flood may be troubling to us. Why would Genesis put forth a theology in which God would cause such destruction and devastation? Why would God save only one family and two of every kind of animal and wipe out everything else? So early on in this story, was humanity already so irredeemable to warrant such wrath against all creation?

It's ok to ask these questions. And I'm not sure there are necessarily easy answers.

But one thing that helps me understand this story is to view it in the context of the broader narrative of the Genesis story. The flood is reminiscent of the world before creation, when only the waters of chaos covered the formless void. At the dawn of creation, God spoke over the waters and called forth light, land, plants and animals, and human beings.

And then human beings were given freedom of will and choice. And, as we know, the resulting choices complicated things. Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil and their eyes were opened to a much more complex existence than their garden paradise. Their exit from Eden introduced the challenges of human existence – mortality, suffering, hard work. And it wouldn't be too long before human acts of violence would enter the story when Cain killed his brother Abel.

And it is this violence that eventually leads to the flood in Genesis. The violence of human beings against one another spirals out of control until God tells Noah that it is time to build the ark. Enough is enough. Creation needs a do-over. Though it is God's choice to bring about the flood, part of the point of this part of this story is that the violence human beings have wrought upon each other has brought them to the brink of their own destruction. Troubling as it is, God is grieved and sees no alternative. Troubling as it is, this story serves as a warning to all who hear it that we are called to do better.

The violence and destruction of the great flood may unsettle us. But so too should the violence and destruction human beings enact upon one another. This story begs us to consider what metaphorical floods of destruction we continue to inflict upon one another and what other options we have. What healing is needed? What repair is needed? What re-creation do we need to work on? And how is God calling us to be co-creators of the just and peaceful world we all long for, the world God longs for?

Things change after the flood as creation begins to unfold once again, brand new, with God's invitation into covenantal relationship. And the rainbow is the symbol of this covenant. God changes course and evolves over the course of this story. After the flood, God lets go of the path of wrath, destruction and violence and instead embraces the path of grace, creation and peace. God promises not to destroy again.

In this moment, the bow, a weapon of war (imagined by the ancients as capable of shooting lightning bolts, by the way) is emptied of its arrows, laid down in the sky, and transformed into a symbol of peace and a symbol of hope – pure light, containing every color of creation. That rainbow will remind God to remember and honor this covenant, to honor this promise, says Genesis. And so too should it remind human beings. There will be no more do-overs. And along with God’s promise of no more destruction comes the reminder that we are called to work with God to work it out.

All of this says something about how the story of Genesis has actually evolved in its theology to embrace this notion of covenant – to embrace this idea that we, God’s people, members of God’s creation, have a role to play in this ever-unfolding creation that is still a work in progress.

The theology of covenant is always relational. And there is give and take involved in all relationships. God the Creator, the giver of all life, invites us to value that gift of life itself – to value not only our own lives, but the lives of others, and indeed all life, all creation. In order to uphold our end of this covenant, humanity is called to do our part – to try our best to make sure all are treated with dignity, respect, and fairness; to work for just and peaceful resolutions to conflicts and disagreements; to honor creation and all the creatures of this earth; to not exploit God’s creation for our own ends. The heart of this call to covenantal relationship is to love God and to love our neighbors (including our non-human neighbors). From the beginning this has been the call; this has been the invitation.

It’s a tall order. And we’ve been working on it for millennia. This covenantal relationship has been named, and interpreted, and fleshed out throughout the scriptures of our tradition. That is why we return to these texts over and over again. And that is why they can still inspire us, as we seek to live into this relationship in our own lives, in our own time.

Just as the ancient world was aware of the challenge of fully living into this covenant, so are we. They knew the realities of injustice and the difficulty of seeking a more just future. They knew the experiences of war and violence and the struggle to create lasting peace between peoples. They knew the weight of human tragedy and wondered why we suffer; why bad things happen to good people; why some people have so much and wield so much power and others so little. Many of our deep concerns are the same ones faced by generations past.

And yet, despite the often-challenging circumstances, that rainbow promise still shines brightly and calls to us. On the other side of the storm, as the flood waters recede, there is a new dawn, a new promise, a new hope, and a new day.

After forty days and nights aboard a boat, sailing upon this watery wilderness with his family and his zoo, Noah began to see this new dawn unfold.

I wonder if Jesus thought about Noah at all when he wandered through his own wilderness for forty days and forty nights. Did it rain while he was out there? Did he see a rainbow

and was reminded of Noah's story and God's promise? Did he imagine what new dawn God might be calling him to help co-create? Was he already thinking about how he would invite others to join him?

Jesus took up that covenantal relationship for himself. And he took that rainbow promise seriously. When he emerged from his forty days in the wilderness, he got to work right away – calling disciples, teaching, healing, demonstrating God's love for all people. He showed his followers then and now how to live into this covenant and reminded us that the rainbow promise of God is still shining, still inviting, still calling to us.

The season of Lent invites us to reflect on this for ourselves. Lent is always a good time for some personal reflection, prayer, and spiritual practice. It's a good time to take some time to intentionally take stock of our spiritual lives. And since this question of covenantal relationship is at the heart of our faith, it's a good focus for Lent if you're looking for one.

How are we living into this covenantal relationship at this point in time? How are we loving God? How are we loving our neighbors? How are we loving creation? And we should not exclude ourselves from this either. How are we loving ourselves as members of God's beloved creation? Are we taking time to nurture all of these relationships? If so, how?

These are always good questions to ask. And they're not intended to be "gotcha" questions to make us feel guilty that we're somehow not doing enough. No one has to do everything.

Rather, they are focus questions. They are questions to help us reflect for ourselves on this foundational call to faith, this basic call to covenantal relationship.

How are we loving God? How are we loving our neighbors? How are we loving all of God's beloved creation?

How are we remembering, honoring, and living into that rainbow promise made so long ago; the promise that inspired and informed our ancestors in faith and inspires us still?

We've been wading through a lot of flood waters lately. Floods of sickness and grief. Floods of racism. Floods of economic disparity. Floods of division and conflict. Floods of uncertainty on so many levels. It can get exhausting.

But perhaps, even as we still navigate the flood waters, we can remember that after the storm clouds part, the sun will shine again and we might just glimpse anew a bright and colorful rainbow through the mist and remember that promise of God that still persists.

Amen.