

## “Rend Your Hearts: This is the Sign”

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kills

Based on material provided by UMC Discipleship Ministries<sup>1</sup>

We have entered into the season of Lent, that time in the church year when we intentionally reflect on our life in Christ. Lent was created by the Church. You won't find it mentioned anywhere in the Bible. It is—like other seasons in the church year: Advent, Christmas, and Easter—part of Christian tradition that helps order the time of our lives. During Lent, we make time in our busy schedules to:

- **Reflect on our relationship with God.** How are we doing with this? Do we talk to God often? What kind of time do we spend with God, and what is the conversation like? Is it one-sided, with us asking all the questions? Or, are we making the time to listen to God?
- **Consider our shortcomings.** Ah, here's the part nobody likes. Nobody likes to think about their sin, much less talk about them. But it is a fact of the human condition that we sin, in ways both large and small. On our own, we cannot get this relationship with God right. On our own, we cannot get the relationship with others right. That's because on our own, we cannot save ourselves—only God can do that.
- **Receive God's grace.** The good news of Lent—and there is good news—is that God has provided a way for us to be recipients of God's grace. That way is Jesus Christ, who lived for us, died for us, and was raised from the grave for us, so that we can have eternal life.

Jesus Christ is God's grace poured out for us. Jesus is the sign of hope from God that all is not lost; that we are beloved by God; and that we, despite our human nature, can share in the Divine nature through faith in Jesus Christ.

We begin our lesson today with another sign from God in the story of Noah. It is a sign that comes to us by way of water. Water plays a huge role in sustaining life on planet earth. Living creatures need to have water and cannot go without it for very long. Water is present in the Creation story in Genesis 1, in the very beginning, when God created and put things into order, the first thing that was present was the chaos of water.

### GENESIS

**Gen 1-3:** Creation & Fall

**Gen 4:** Cain & Abel

**Gen 5:** From Adam to Noah

**Gen 6:** Humanity disappoints God; but Noah finds favor

**Gen 7-8:** The Flood

**Gen 9:** God's Covenant with Noah



Fast forward a few chapters and we are back in the waters when God, dissatisfied with the direction creation was going, opened up the heavens and flooded the earth with torrents of water.

Think about God's relationship with humankind up to Genesis Chapter 9. God was not involved with human beings very much in the stories that lie between the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden in Chapter 3, and

God's decision in Chapter 6 to “reboot” the creation because it had all gone so terribly wrong. Now we come to Genesis 9, and everything changes.

<sup>1</sup> “Rend Your Hearts: This is the Sign,” UMC, Discipleship Ministries, article online, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/rend-your-hearts-claiming-the-promise/first-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes>, accessed 3 February 2021.

- God, the dissatisfied Creator, becomes God the Protector.
- God chose to stand WITH Creation, and not against it.
- God was committed to stand with that which was created out of nothing.

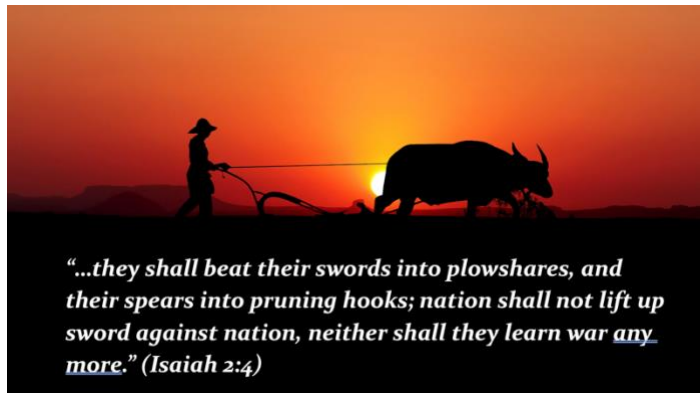
This is symbolized in the story by the rainbow.

“I establish my covenant with you, that 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.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (Genesis 9:11-13).

Here’s something really important to know: the word we read as “rainbow” has another more common meaning in Hebrew. It is simply: bow, as in a bow and arrow kind of bow. The bow was a weapon of war.

The symbolism here is clear: God is setting aside the bow, the weapon used to bring destruction. God is shifting from being a warrior God to a protector God. We’ve heard this elsewhere in the Bible, in the Prophet Isaiah, who spoke about God coming to judge the nations, and the result is...:

“...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2:4)



God the warrior becomes God the protector.

Some folks reading this passage continue to worry about the fate of planet earth. With the rainbow, God has only crossed off one of many ways our world can meet its demise. But there’s more to the sign, the rainbow, that it appears. There is here a complete reorientation of the relationship between God and God’s people. It is no longer an adversarial relationship—the discouraged God versus sinful humanity—but a relationship of solidarity. God now stands with humanity, with the Creation, and is committed to their future. And there is no greater evidence of this than the Savior we praise, Jesus Christ, who came to us as Emmanuel: God with us.

Our lesson from Mark gives us another sign out of water: baptism.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:9-11).

Just as God gave a sign in the rainbow that meant God would become the protecting God, the baptism of Jesus is the sign of God with and for us.

Jesus came as the rainbow personified. It took the heavens being torn open for the Spirit to descend on Jesus and affirm this...and, the sign of the water, again. Jesus was the sign that God is present with us and that God is our advocate and not our adversary.

Part of our work in this season of Lent is to assess how well we are doing in following that example and in being that sign for others. As we rend our collective hearts before God over our sinfulness, part of our confession may be that **WE** have been more adversaries toward God’s work than advocates.

- Are there times and places where we have ignored God's will and said or done something that is insulting, belittling, or destructive of another person?
- Are there times and places where we have failed to do what was right in protecting another person or another part of God's Creation?

If we dwell on these things, I'm sure we can think of cases where we have been less God's people than God wants us to be...than we want us to be. This may cause us to be discouraged, but we can take heart. For while we may fall in our discipleship, God has given us grace enough to get back up.

Our world looks a mess. It's always looked that way, actually. But even through the mess, the trouble, the storms, the chaos of our lives, God's promise of grace and hope shine through. In fact, they cannot shine through without darkness and disappointment lingering the background.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana, a pastor and author, provides this explanation for why we can rely on God, even when we are discouraged. It's because God's signs of hope come not when everything is smooth sailing, but when the storms are still raging. She writes:

"...rainbows don't reveal themselves on pure, clear-weather days. They require just the right combination of sunlight and rain droplets for the proper refraction to occur. It's a meteorological as well as a spiritual truth: the promises of God are empty platitudes without a backdrop of challenge, adversity, even despair. Just as Jesus' baptism is punctuated by a tear in the heavenly curtain, the covenant of God stands in the midst of a world that is still not as it should be."<sup>2</sup>

Our challenge and our call is to live into the covenant of God; to be God's covenant people; to be renewed by the power of God's Holy Spirit in the holy time of Lent; and, to become signs of God's love and grace in and for the world. The rainbow was one such sign. Jesus was another. May we learn how to become signs and symbols of God's grace, and more, on our Lenten journey this year. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> MaryAnn McKibben Dana, "Are the Heavens Still Torn Apart?" *The Christian Century*, Sunday's Coming for February 21, 2020, email.