



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

July 29, 2018

“Never Again”

(Genesis 9:8-17)

Rev. David K. Groth

God’s Promise Sealed by a Rainbow
(Genesis 9:8-17).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and most merciful God, the protector of all who trust in You, strengthen our faith and give us courage to believe that in Your love You will rescue us from all adversities; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Let's not rush too quickly to the rainbow. After all, it won't mean anything to us until we come to terms with the flood. What do *you* make of the flood?

I submit we've pretty much defanged this monster. We've turned it into harmless children's books with pop-out animal caricatures. We focus on Noah's big boat, and the animals two by two, and the rainbow, and we gloss over the destruction. As a result, the promise of the rainbow really doesn't mean much anymore. Who needs a rainbow promise when the destructive flood didn't happen in the first place? It's like communion in that way, which means nothing if you haven't done the work of repentance and contrition. You might even walk away from the altar feeling like you just did God a favor by lending him a bit of your credibility, your nod of approval.

Most have turned the flood into mythology, right there with Prometheus and Zeus, in part because a myth is so much easier. Myths don't require faith or repentance.

No double standards here! If the flood didn't happen, then we should really let the rainbow hang meaningless in the sky! If the flood is a myth, then the rainbow can be nothing more to us than the refraction and dispersion of the sun's light by water droplets. A colorful prism, but not a comforting promise.

To believe in God is to believe in things otherwise impossible, for nothing is impossible for God. To believe in God is to believe that the one who gives all life on earth can just as easily take it back. To believe in God is to acknowledge that the one who calmed the storm can just as easily put us in the middle of one. Life ordinarily ends on

this earth for all creatures, but in an extraordinary way, and just once, the Lord hastened the end of most life on earth.

The story starts in Genesis 6. “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become . . . and was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them.’” Notice just as the whole creation was caught up in the fall of Adam and Eve, so the whole creation is caught up in the cleansing flood. And the whole creation is caught up in our redemption too, but that’s a different sermon.

I imagine Noah wanted desperately to forget his memories of the flood, to erase that which woke him up in the middle of the night and gave him an excuse to drink to help him forget. He remembers how it slowly unfolded. It took some time before the rivers rose and spilled over their banks and came into the houses and filled up the cellars, and soon flooded the fields and forest floors. He remembered how people were driven to their rooftops where they huddled, wrapped in blankets, looking for rescue from anyone with even a small boat. Meanwhile they also looked for a break in the clouds, and reassured each other that it would clear up soon (it had to), it just can’t go on like this.

Noah remembered the animals he’d had to leave behind, someone’s dog paddling furiously across the current, trying to reach higher ground; the marmalade cat clinging to the branch of a tree; the team of oxen hastily abandoned, still tied to the shed. He remembered the pleas of the people looking up at him from the base of the ark, holding their little ones up as if Noah’s arms were fifty feet long. He remembered how quickly those pleas turned into howls of anger and protest. But what could Noah do? It was the Lord who had tucked them into the ark and then “shut them in” (Gen. 7:16), an act of mercy to protect the family from assault and to protect them from any inclination to show mercy to last-minute penitents. He remembered some tried

to force their way in to the ark, tried to climb its sides, and pry open its door. But no power on earth could break down that door. No power on earth could put at risk those whom God was protecting.

Noah remembered the floating debris of logs and trees and rooftops, and within that flotsam there were corpses of men and animals bobbing in the water. And he remembered the stench. And he remembered how the creation outside grew quieter and quieter. And still it rained.

And Noah remembered the last voice he heard from outside the ark, a man in his own little boat who with sun-burnt skin and cracked lips cursed Noah and cursed Noah's God and put his oars into the water and rowed away. Noah remembered how relieved he was when all the floating flotsam finally fell to the bottom of the sea, and the grisly evidence of God's wrath disappeared under the waves.

Noah also remembered the endless days in the ark – the miserable food, the smell. But he also remembered the rare, remarkable opportunity to get a close view of God's good creation, the stunning array of birds and reptiles and mammals and insects, whose very existence tells of a God who loves to create.

Outside, when the deluge finally ceased, all was quiet, unforgettably so.

Noah released a raven to see if it could find any dry land, and watched it fly away until no bigger than a speck. And he remembered the feeling in his stomach when it returned, exhausted, having found no place to roost.

Sometime later Noah sent out a dove, but the dove also found no place to rest, and returned. Noah reached out, and it landed on the calluses of his upturned palm and with his eyes closed and tears on his cheeks, Noah touched his lips to its feathers, and felt the panic of the bird's heart. And it dawned on Noah, all life was just as fragile and vulnerable, just as dependent on God. A week later, he sent out another dove, and this one came back with a sprig of the olive tree in its beak, the first sign of hope and peace.

The earth is mostly cleansed of its wickedness,

except for those on the ark. There's still sin lodged deep within their hearts, but God always saves a remnant in spite of it all, a stump, a root, seeds to be planted.

The waters recede, the sun shines, the winds blow, the ground dries, and a new green world starts to blossom up out of the sodden wreckage of the old.

Finally God invites Noah out into this new creation. And then the promise: "Never again" God says. "Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." Three times in just five verses God says, "Never again." It seems God's heart is also exhausted and grieved by the destruction.

Growing up during the cold war I remembered hearing this promise and thinking, "Never again by flood, yes, but he doesn't say anything about the total destruction of nuclear war." I had turned the promise into a hidden threat. But the promise is simple and transparent: "Never again". In spite of what new meanness men might think up.

Verse 12, "And 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.'" In verse 16 he calls it an "everlasting covenant", which means, it's still in effect. Still today, the rainbow is the visible seal of God's covenant, and its message is simple. "Never again." However much it hurt Noah to see corpses of men and animals floating in the debris, it hurt God so much more. Therefore, "Never again!"

We use that phrase also in reference to the holocaust of World War II. "Never again!" Never again will we allow genocide to happen. And yet, it keeps happening, most recently in Syria, Rwanda, Burma, Yemen, the sickening list goes on and on in spite of all our museums dedicated to, "Never again."

Never again! It became a movement on the heels of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, but still we brace ourselves for the next one.

Never again! We hear it from the addict. We hear it from the cheating spouse. We say it quietly to ourselves after a near miss while driving and texting. Never again. We hear ourselves saying it after drinking way too much, or after succumbing to some temptation. Never again. It's what sinful people tell themselves to feel better about themselves. And though those two words are strong, the flesh and the spirit are weak.

But this is God's "Never again!" with all the power and faithfulness and love of God behind them. It's a promise "for all generations" he says, which means it's a promise for you. The sight of a rainbow should cheer your heart, not just for its beauty, but for the promise it now signifies. It reminds us that God is faithful to all his promises, even when his people are not.

It's a promise of grace and mercy. There's no hidden threat here. Some have noted that the rainbow is an inverted weapon of war, and if God did put an arrow on the bow, it would be pointing away from us, and so the rainbow proclaims peace between God and man. There may be something to that because in Hebrew the same word is used for both the rainbow and the bow as a weapon. In the hands of man the bow is an instrument of combat. The bow bent by the hand of God has become a symbol of peace. It means though the world deserves judgment, God will show restraint and mercy.

When Dan Brandenstein was here a few years back, I asked him, "What was the most beautiful sight from the space shuttle?" Without hesitation he answered "the sun rising up from behind the earth." From that distance the atmosphere serves as a dense prism and creates a rainbow effect right above the earth.

Coincidentally, I read a book entitled "Riding Rockets" by another shuttle astronaut named Mike Mullane, and that was his favorite sight as well. One of the things he loved to do in space, when every one else was sleeping in the lower level, was to go into the cockpit, turn off all the instrument lighting, turn on his little Walkman loaded with

Pachelbel's Canon. He'd wedge his head between the dashboard and the window. The shuttle orbited with its topside facing the planet. He writes, "The real joy of my new position was the illusion it created. I could put my head so far forward that the shuttle's structure disappeared behind me. My view of Earth was completely unobstructed." "The rising sun painted the horizon in twenty shades of indigo, blue, orange, and red" (*Riding Rockets*, 332ff). "An intense color spectrum, a hundred times more brilliant than any rainbow seen on Earth. To say the view was overwhelmingly beautiful would be an insult to God. There are no human words to capture the magnificence" (*ibid.* 170ff).

The promise of the rainbow, the promise of God's grace, is an invitation to put your most basic trust in God. Especially when life is chaotic, when it feels like the force of a mighty flood sweeping away everything that is beautiful and precious, remember the rainbow, and the promise that God is trustworthy, that you can count on him.

We Christians believe this promise of mercy was made and fulfilled ultimately in God's Son who lived among us, died our death, and then, on the third day, rose again – a sign and seal, like a beautiful rainbow, of God's victory over sin and death.

One last thing: One day Jesus will be our judge. Revelation 4 gives us a glimpse of God on his judgment throne. It's fearsome, with flashes of lightening and peals of thunder, heavenly creatures shouting, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." (Rev. 4). But, thankfully, there's also a rainbow above the throne, and the promise of which is clear: As Judge, Jesus will have mercy.

So when you see a rainbow, give thanks to God. And remember the promise; "Never again!" He will have mercy on you, and me, and all creation. Thanks be to God!

