

## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church - Watertown, WI

### “Never Again”

Rev. David K. Groth - July 25, 2021

Genesis 9:8-17 God's Promise Sealed by a Rainbow

I submit we've pretty much defanged this monster. We've turned it into a harmless children's book with pop-out animal caricatures. We focus on Noah's big boat, and the animals two by two, and the rainbow. We cancel the destruction. Or, we deny it ever happened, and thereby empty the rainbow of any real meaning. Who needs a rainbow promise when the flood is a myth, right up there with Zeus and Prometheus? Myths are so much easier; they don't require faith or compel repentance. If the flood is a myth, then the rainbow might as well hang meaningless in the sky; or be hijacked as a symbol for some other movement, some other agenda.

To believe in God, however, is to believe that the one who gives 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 ends on this earth for all creatures, but in an extraordinary way, and just once, the Lord hastened the end of life for all life . . . all but a few.

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.’”

To the end of his days, Noah remembered how the rain came down in sheets and it just would not quit. Noah wanted to forget, drank to forget, but he remembered how the rivers rose and soon spilled over their banks. Then the waters marched into houses and filled up cellars, and then flooded the fields and forest floors. It drove people to their rooftops where they huddled, wrapped in blankets, looking for rescue. They told each other that it would be ok. The rain would stop. After all, it just can't go on like this.

Noah grieved for them. And he grieved for the rest of creation caught up in man's wickedness. The team of oxen hastily abandoned, still tied to the shed. The marmalade cat clinging to the branch of a tree. 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 rage. But what could he do? It was the Lord who closed the door of the ark and “shut them in” (Gen. 7:16), an act of mercy to protect the family from the assault of desperate people on the outside. Noah remembered how some tried to force their way in the ark. They tried to climb its sides. They tried to pry open its door. But no power on earth could further endanger lives God was protecting.

Noah remembered the floating debris of logs and trees and rooftops. Mingled within that flotsam were the rotting corpses of men and animals bobbing in the water. And he remembered the stench. He remembered how the creation outside grew quieter and quieter . . . except for the rain. Still it rained.

And Noah remembered his relief when all that floated finally fell to the bottom of the sea, and the grisly evidence of God's wrath disappeared under the waves. The time of fear had ended. The time for hope had begun.

Still, the days in the ark were hard. The toil, the smell, the dark dankness. But there were blessings too. The extraordinary opportunity to get a close view of God's good creation. No one else before or since had seen the stunning array of birds and reptiles and mammals and insects, all in one place. Noah praised the God who so beautifully and lovingly created all things great and small.

Outside, when the deluge finally ceased, all was quiet, unforgettably so. Inside, however, it was full of life: barking, braying, whooping, sometimes singing, sometimes grouching and complaining. At other times, the whole ark was quiet as a mouse.

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. All life was just so fragile and vulnerable, just as dependent. A week later, he sent out another dove, and this one came back with a sprig of the olive tree in its beak, another sign of hope and peace.

The earth has been cleansed of its wickedness, but once again, God has saved a remnant, 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.

Never again. We often use that phrase too. For example, in reference to the holocaust. “Never again!” Never again will we allow genocide to happen. And yet, it keeps happening: in Syria, Rwanda, Burma, Yemen, China . . . the sickening list goes on and on in spite of all our museums dedicated to, “Never again.”

Never again! We hear it after every mass shooting, and brace ourselves for the next one.

Never again! We hear it from the addict.

Never again! We hear it from the cheating spouse, the abusive spouse.

Never again. We say it quietly to ourselves after a near miss while driving and texting.

Never again. We whisper it to ourselves after drinking way too much and embarrassing ourselves and others.

Never again. It’s what sinners tell themselves to feel better about themselves.

Never again. They are strong words, but the flesh and the spirit are weak.

But this is God’s “Never again!” and altogether different. When God says these words, they have 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. 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.’” He calls it an “everlasting covenant” (v.16), which means, of course, it’s still in effect. Still today, the rainbow is the visible seal of God’s ancient promise, and its message is simple. “Never again.” However much it hurt Noah to see so much loss of life, it hurt God so much more. Therefore, “Never again!”

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 from God is simple and transparent: “Never again”.

Never again, because God has sent His Son to bear the sin of the world. Man will not be held responsible for his sin. God will.

Never again, because Christ the Lamb of God has been sacrificed for our sin.

Never again, because you are baptized; you’ve been washed. You live in the state of God’s grace.

Never again, because there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

Never again, because with His resurrection, Jesus has cancelled the curse of sin.

Never again, because the remnant of our day, the church here and around the world shall stand; not all the forces of hell can sink that ark.

Never again, in spite of whatever new means of wickedness and destruction men might dream up.

Let the sight of a rainbow cheer your heart, not just for its beauty, but for the promise it now signifies. “Never again.”

Some have noted the rainbow is an inverted weapon of war. Therefore, 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. This is God’s promise and only God’s promise. It is a true unilateral covenant. There is nothing required of the rest of creation.

A few years back when Dan Brandenstein was here, 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 prism and turns the light of the sun into a rainbow curved over the earth. I love that image; there’s always a rainbow hugging the earth.

So, the rainbow isn’t just a promise. It’s also an invitation, an invitation to put your most basic trust in God. An invitation to live boldly, faithfully, courageously, knowing God loves you and, in Christ, loves His whole creation. An invitation to entrust Him with your life and with your death.

When you see a rainbow, don’t forget to give thanks to God. Thank Him for the promise. Thank Him for His grace and patience and mercy. Thank Him for sending His Son. Thank Him for the ark of His church. Thank Him for salvation in Christ. Amen.