

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – A Sign – February 20, 2021
Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15

The primary function of biblical covenants “is to serve as a formal commitment between two parties. Covenants establish, or recognize, a relationship.”

¹ In the case of our first lesson this morning, that relationship is between God and all of creation. And the sign of God’s covenant is a stunning array of colors which comprise a meteorological phenomenon that we call the rainbow.

Rainbows, as you are already aware, “emerge only in the midst of, or just after, a rainstorm.” ² And here we find a theological link. For in the aftermath of the flood narrative, “God is not promising the complete absence of loss and destruction in the future.” Rather, God is pointing the way to the possibility of “life after loss” and to the audacity of “hope after destruction.” ³

As the scriptural narrative unfolds, “a rainbow appears, vineyards are planted, children are born, humanity spreads out across the globe... The people of Judah, too,

¹ Ryan P. Bonfiglio, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*. ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 24.

² Bonfiglio, 24.

³ Bonfiglio, 24.

will survive the occupying empires if they cling to God.”⁴ These are the foundational promises upon which the gospel stands.

Hippolytus of Rome was one of the most important Christian theologians of the second and third centuries. He writes, “For as in the ark of Noah the love of God toward man is signified by the dove, so also now the Spirit, descending in the form of a dove, bearing as it were the fruit of the olive, rested on Him to whom the witness was borne. For what reason? That the faithfulness of the Father’s voice might be made known, and that the prophetic utterance of a long time past might be ratified.”

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Hippolytus reminds us that as we enter more deeply into the New Testament, and especially as we begin the Lenten journey, “the promise of [good news] is not life without death, but resurrection from the dead.”⁶ We receive this promise not only in the world to come, but here and now, in this lifetime, as well. For while humankind ceaselessly continues to partake in evil, “God makes a covenant nonetheless.” And in doing so, God commits “to be in relation with [a fallen]

⁴ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “How Genesis Faces Chaos,” *Journal for Preachers, Lent 2021*, 12.

⁵ Hippolytus of Rome, “The Discourse on the Holy Theophany,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Alexander Roberts, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), 236-237.

⁶ Bonfiglio, 25.

humanity, to deliver out of destruction those who are not yet inclined to do good, and to suffer with, and sometimes because of, a broken world.”⁷

Perhaps, this is why Augustine once wrote that “not only the world as a whole, but the church itself, is a *corpus permixtum*: a mixed body, filled with people whose lives seem to overflow with goodness, and also with those who seem to lack goodness to an astonishing degree.”⁸ From this perspective, we find one of the central messages of the Christian faith; namely, we are all in need of redemption, even those of us who strive to be faithful. And we give thanks that “God will redeem through God’s own self-giving love.” Yes. “Through willing submission to human evil, God will drown out evil in flood of divine love that holds the promise of redemption for the whole creation.”⁹

In the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus has just been baptized and he has received the gift of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. The Spirit of God “does not merely touch Jesus and anoint him with a heavenly benediction; it stays with him. The Spirit hovers, surrounds and envelops him, enters and abides with him,

⁷ Bonfiglio, 25.

⁸ David Cunningham, “God’s Judgment (but Mostly Our Own) in Times of Crisis, *Journal for Preachers, Lent 2021*, 20.

⁹ James S. Lowry, “Preaching the Lenten Texts 2021: Hope for the Covenant Community, *Journal for Preachers, Lent 2021*, 4.

uplifts and sustains him.”¹⁰ This is what gives him the stamina to affirm God’s call upon his life, even during a time of trial. A divine voice commissions him to service. And yet, evil is still lurking. Soon, Jesus will be sent into the wilderness where he is tested for a period of 40 days.

You may recall that, in the twentieth century, during the rise of National Socialism in Germany, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth expressed that “in a time of extraordinary crisis, we need to hold fast to what we already know to be true, and not capitulate to the pressures of the moment.” Barth knew that, “because of these pressures, we will be tempted to find solutions to our problems that are completely out of line with our most fundamental beliefs.”¹¹

This is precisely what happened to Jesus in the wilderness and on the cross. In times of extraordinary crisis, Jesus was tempted, yet he remained faithful to his deepest convictions in God. In doing so, he became our model of faithfulness in the midst of a pandemic, as we, too, wrestle both with anxiety and with questions about the future.

¹⁰ Lincoln E. Galloway, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*. ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 37-38.

¹¹ Cunningham, 21.

Some people confuse hope with wishful thinking. But this is not the message of the gospel. As Christians, we do not merely wish for the best, but rather, remain steadfast in “an expected joy that God’s will shall come about, according to God’s purposes.”¹² For this reason, we are able to live in the confidence that even in times of crisis, signs of God’s goodness abound.

Presently, there are a number of “things that, in the midst of an acute public health crisis, are being judged and found wanting.” These include “self-indulgence, Enlightenment rationality, and globalist attempts to master the earth.”¹³ Further, we are now learning from experience, “including the theological insights that we have gained,” that there are many new ways that we can reach out to and take care of one another.”¹⁴

In this moment, God’s goodness is present in the opportunities now before us as we “give careful consideration to the structures and systems that have contributed to our current misery and seek to ameliorate them. And, because we have often been denied the option of coming together in a common space for worship and sacrament, we have been reminded of the importance of doing so when we can.”¹⁵

¹² De La Torre, 26-27.

¹³ Cunningham, 17.

¹⁴ Cunningham, 22.

¹⁵ Cunningham, 22-23.

None of this is to say that God caused the pandemic. But it is to say that God's goodness and transformative purposes both can and will be accomplished through it. Until we, who spend so much of our lives searching for a sign, recognize God's goodness in the rainbow, and in the moment of baptism, and in the longing of the wilderness, and even, in the agony of the cross. For God's self-giving love is imprinted in each of these, and is found even in the midst of pandemic. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.