

Genesis 9:8-17

Under the Rainbow

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⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ 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.” ¹² 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

I’m going to begin with an extensive quote from Justin Michael Reed, Assistant Professor of the Hebrew Bible at Louisville Seminary. This is from his commentary on our Genesis passage on Workingpreacher.org. Here’s the quote:

“As the conclusion to a story of God wiping out almost all life, and right *before* Noah curses his innocent grandson, we find Genesis 9:8-17, God’s eternal covenant with all creatures. It is a beautiful covenant in which God unconditionally promises to withhold divine destruction, and God sets a sign—a (rain)bow—in the

sky to assure humanity that we need not fear another cataclysm like that which is depicted in Genesis 6–8.

“This is a much loved passage by adults and one that we share with children from a very early age. But even as we draw out meanings from this passage that we would like to uphold, we must not ignore the terrible..context [of]... the divinely orchestrated genocide inscribed in the story of the flood...

“[and] If we are not careful, we are prone to treat the rainbow as a happy ending to the flood while paying no attention to the horrible historical consequences that have come out of how people read the verses that [follow in which Noah curses the sons of Ham. Those verses have served [to justify]...all kinds of oppression including...Christians persecuting Jews, Muslims enslaving non-Muslims, Christians enslaving people of African descent, and Hutu massacring Tutsi.”¹

So, yeah—we shouldn’t get too comfortable with the story of the flood and the rainbow. It’s not a sweet story. It is a story of destruction and regret and repentance, which has been twisted and used in some terrible ways over the centuries. Yet, it could be truly redemptive. It could completely change how we see God and how we treat one another, if we read the story more carefully.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-genesis-98-17-5>

Because, here's the thing: when I say that this is a story of destruction and regret and repentance, I'm not talking about human destructiveness and regret and repentance: I'm talking about God's.

Remember: God got so fed up with the way the human race had turned out, that God wiped out the whole world—*all living creatures*—with the exception of one, exemplary family and a few, breeding pairs of each other species. Imagine the homes and fields and habitats swept away. Imagine the untold number of bodies bobbing to the surface as the waters began to recede. Imagine!

And to think that this, first genocide came from God's hand? Unimaginable.

And it's not a big stretch from seeing this as an acceptable method of problem-solving for *God*, to thinking that we, humans, could use the same method. Not for nothing is genocide called "*ethnic cleansing*."

But if we read carefully, we'll see that God is troubled by this story, too. God hates what God did. How do we know? Because as God surveys the damage, God says, three times, "Never again."

The ark lands on sodden soil, and God surveys the carnage, broken hearted. What seemed like the logical solution—just get rid of all the sinners—turned out to be a

fountain of pain for everyone, including God. And God says, “never again, never again, never again.”

This story couldn't be more timely for us, as we look over the carnage of these last few years. So many different kinds of carnage. The carnage of endless war in Afghanistan and Iraq; the carnage of gun violence in our city streets and in the hallways of our schools and inside the walls of our Capitol building; the carnage of lives being sucked down the drains of poverty and racism and homophobia; the carnage of COVID, of course; and also the carnage of relationships ruptured by political polarization.

We human beings have written each other off as lost causes. Flushed each other out of our lives like so much sewage, because it feels like it would just be simpler to be rid of those who cause us pain.

But that's what God seemed to think, too, only to discover that the cost was simply too much to bear. Wipe everyone out, and all you're left with is wreckage and heartbreak.

Never again, never again, never again.

So, what can we do, instead? We can't simply accept behaviors that victimize others or ourselves, right? But how do we stand up to destructive behaviors, without becoming destructive, ourselves?

How can we stand up for what's right without crushing those who are wrong?

How can we hold people accountable in ways that are restorative instead of punitive, so that the humanity of everyone is honored?

I don't know. Sorry.

But I think there is a hint in this passage of how *God* decided to do things differently. It's in the use of the word, *covenant*. "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh."

The words, "Never again," are repeated three times in this passage. The word, "covenant"—that unbreakable tie that binds a relationship—*that* word, is repeated seven times.

Covenant, covenant, covenant, covenant, covenant, covenant, covenant. Why all the repetition? It's not for our benefit: it's for God's. And so is the rainbow. That beautiful, prismatic arc isn't put there as a sign for us: it's a reminder for God.

“When *I* see the bow in the sky,” God says, “*I* will remember my covenant between me and you and every living creature.”

But we need to remember, too. Because that covenant connects us, as well—not just to God, but to one another. That covenant means that we can’t harm someone else without hurting ourselves, and we can’t cut someone else off without losing a part of ourselves.

So: Other people: can’t live with them, can’t live without them. It’s a conundrum.

It’s the same conundrum that God has faced since the first human beings took breath, stood up, and went their own way.

Can’t live with them, can’t live without them.

But what God took away from the catastrophe of the flood was that it’s better to live with them than without them.

And so it is for us, as well. Because we can’t rupture the covenant with others without rupturing the covenant with God. It’s a package deal.

Sam and I have been watching a show on Apple TV called “Trying,” in which a young couple, Nikki and Jason, are trying to adopt a child. As part of the initial process, they assure the social worker who is assessing them for suitability as

parents, that they have a strong support system. Then, they have to reassure themselves that that is, in fact, the case. So they invite their closest friends, and their families from both sides, to a gathering at their apartment.

All these people who love each other, but among whom there are long-standing tensions and resentments because, you know, family! Eventually, thoughts are shared and things are said, and the afternoon devolves into a storm of squabbles.

When Nikki runs off to the bedroom in despair, Jason goes to find her. She points out how everything is falling apart—like, *this is our support system?! But then Jason gestures to that whole, noisy mess of people arguing in the living room and points out, “Yes, but they’re still here.”*

They’re still here.

That’s what God means by “covenant.” Not that God will roll over for whatever we do, or take whatever we throw, because, even after the promise of the rainbow, there would be some pretty rocky times between God and humankind, when God’s people had to feel the full weight of the natural consequences of their actions, and in which God subjected them to some pretty extensive and severe time-outs.

But God was still there. And, eventually, so were God’s people.

So. Here we stand in the aftermath of the flood, and it's still raining. From Washington, D.C., and from all over this country and this world, the voices of hate keep pouring down. The voices that label this person or that person, this group or that group, as subhuman and expendable.

But the thing is, it's only in the midst of the rain that the rainbow appears—we wouldn't need it if the sky were clear. In the worst of the downpour, just when we're fed up and ready to write off the whole world, that's when God's light comes arcing across the sky in every possible color to remind us—and God-- of God's covenant of grace that turns us away from death and destruction, and toward love and life. God's covenant of grace that reminds God not to give up, but to stick with us; and reminds us to stick with each other.

As difficult and as complicated as love and life can be. Because what God saw from the flood and its aftermath, and what God wants us to see, as well, is that everyone—every single one of us—is worth saving, no matter what.

