

Genesis 9:8-17

July 28, 2024

“The Sign of the Covenant”

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12B)

Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“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 cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth’”
(Genesis 9:12-13).

Not everyone today knows the significance of the rainbow. Today, the rainbow has all kinds of associations: where dreams come true (The Wizard of Oz), the rainbow connection (Kermit the Frog), leprechauns and pots of gold, and gay pride. Society today is very much confused on the significance of the rainbow. Today, on this Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, we will focus on what the Scriptures tell us of that colorful arch in the sky.

But before that rainbow would appear, this fallen world, fell deeper and deeper into sin. It all started with our first parents: Adam and Eve. Their disobedience to God bred original sin into the generation that followed. As each generation came, this fallen world devolved further and further down into a quagmire of cruelty, violence, and wickedness. This world that God created good, became so full of corruption and violence that the triune God could scarcely recognize His creation. God was grieved that He had created man.

Man’s sin worked the ruin of the whole world. In order to cleanse this world, God chose to start over. He chose to start over with the only family that still knew Him. So, if you think today is bad, in Noah’s time, it was only Noah and his family that knew God. It was down to one family. But still a sinful family.

Just as the rainbow is often misunderstood, Noah’s Ark is also often misunderstood. When you think of Noah’s Ark, what do you think of? Do you see a painting of an ark brimming with smiling animals? Do you see a colorful and cheerful children’s book where all the animals are led to the ark two-by-two?

In God’s grief over human sinfulness, and when God’s patience over sin had expired, God opened the floodgates of the heavens and the floodgates of the great deep burst forth.

Torrents rained down 40 days and 40 nights until the entire world was deluged, flooded, drowned under millions of billions of gallons of churning, life-destroying water. These waters came upon communities suddenly. In a moment, those in the busy, laughing, self-sufficient world were swept away by God's watery judgment. And not just man, but every living creature that had the breath of life had died. The dry land upon which God created every living creature, according to its kind, became a murky mass grave.

Inside the ark was safety and security. Outside the ark was death and destruction. Inside the ark was life and provision. Outside the ark was silence.

Yet, in His mercy, God had warned Noah. He instructed Noah to build an ark. God caused pairs of living creatures, according to their kind, to come to the ark. God remembered Noah and his family. God remembered the animals of the earth. He sealed them in the ark. And in that ark, God preserved man and beast through the raging flood of His own divine judgment upon sin.

When the rains had ended and the dry land finally appeared, some 370 days later, God caused the ark to rest safely upon the earth. They all came out of the ark and into a changed world. I cannot begin to imagine the eerie silence all around Noah and his family. All that remained were eight souls and two of every creature, according to its kind. But as they all came out of that ark, into this changed world, the curse of sin remained. That curse upon creation was not removed. Human sin and the wickedness of man's heart was still in place.

At this point, among all this eerie silence around them, and maybe some worry in their hearts, God initiates the covenant and its sign.

God speaks to Noah and His family with a word of promise for all creation: ***"The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh"*** (Genesis 9:15b). Over and over again in today's Old Testament text, God repeats His promise: ***"I establish My covenant"*** (Genesis 9:9); ***"I establish My covenant"*** (Genesis 9:11); and ***"I will remember My covenant"*** (Genesis 9:15). God repeats His covenant promise three times! Maybe Noah and his family just needed to hear this promise over and over again. They were traumatized. After all, they had just survived a world-destroying flood.

So, what exactly is a covenant? Well, it's an agreement between two parties. In this case, it's between God and His creation. It is likely that we are most familiar with covenants like this: "*You do this ... and I will do that.*" But this covenant between God and all creation is much different. Out of the death and destruction of the flood, God was bringing hope and peace. And this covenant was unilateral. It was one-sided. God would be the One to establish this covenant, and He is obligating Himself to the terms of this covenant. God would require nothing from anyone, and His promise to creation was unconditional.

So, what are the terms of this unilateral covenant? "***Never again***" (Genesis 9:11, 15) would He bring waters from above and beneath to destroy life on the earth. However, rains will continue to fall, floods will still rage and foam, and life would still remain in peril, but "***never again***" will all life perish due to God calling upon the waters to wipe out all life.

Despite God's covenant promise, humanity still struggles with fear and anxiety over the chaos and turmoil that abounds in this fallen world. Because of the fallen nature of this world, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, and straight-line winds persist. But "***never again***" will He flood the earth.

Just as we may worry about what tomorrow brings, most definitely, Noah and his family had some worry. They had heard the covenant promise from God three times. But could God still flood the earth? Could God really be faithful to His promise?

So, to make sure that Noah and His family knew that He is serious about His faithfulness, He provides them the sign of hope: the rainbow – bands of color rising up as an arch above a murky graveyard.

We have all seen a rainbow. How many times have you seen God's rainbow? Just weeks ago, I saw a beautiful rainbow driving home along I-90. Just as I thought I was arriving to the site of the rainbow; I kept on driving. I never reached it, but it was a beautiful sight!

Rainbows are a marvel. The sight of a rainbow can take your breath away. Rainbows are a gift from God. But that rainbow is also a sign. Rainbows communicate. Like the Means of Grace, God gave the rainbow as a sign to embody and confirm His word of promise.

So, what does a rainbow communicate? Well, we already know that that rainbow is the sign that God will never destroy the earth with a flood. But there is more. You see, that rainbow declares God's mercy and His concern for the whole earth, which is why it overarches the world. But that's not all. That beautiful rainbow also declares a warning. That rainbow warns us that just as He destroyed the earth through water, He will one day destroy this earth by fire. It has been said that the colors of the rainbow declare this: blue to red. **Blue** is the color of water, the color of God's bygone wrath. **Red** is the color of fire. So, we can look at the rainbow and be warned of the coming Final Judgment and Last Day. Plus, that rainbow shines with hope and assurance for everyone in Christ as it points to Jesus! So, when God's wrath is roused on that Last Day, God the Father will remember Jesus, who will intercede for us.

This rainbow is not the only sign that God has provided in order to bring us comfort and peace to our troubled hearts and minds. We may not always have devastating floodwaters, but we know that we have all fallen short of God's commandments and all that it demands. Sin is a terminal disease that can only be cured by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Like the rainbow covenant, God also gave us another covenant through the cross of Calvary. There upon the cross, Jesus poured His lifeblood for the sins of the whole world. As Noah, his family, and the animals were hidden in the ark to preserve creation, so you and I are now *"hidden with Christ"* (Colossians 3:3). As the cross stands as the sign of your salvation, so you have received this amazing gift through the washing floodwaters of Holy Baptism (1 Peter 3:20-22).

As the rainbow reminds you that God will never again destroy the world by water, the cross of Christ reminds us that yours and my sins have been paid in full.

As that ark was opened, Noah and those on board came out likely filled with fear and anxiety. And what did God do? He made a covenant with them and with us and with all of creation that He would never again flood the earth as He placed in the clouds that sign of the covenant: a rainbow. That rainbow was given to us, so that we would never forget God's promise to us and to teach us of His precious love for us that He sent us His Son, who has fulfilled the Law, and suffered and died for you and me so that by grace through faith in Jesus, we would live forever. May we always remember the meanings of the rainbow and the cross. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen. + **SOLI DEO GLORIA** +