

**FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT**  
**February 18, 2024**

Genesis 9:8-17

A Bow Seen in the Clouds

Grace and peace to you from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

It is one of the best-known stories in the Bible. It is one of the first stories we teach to our pre-schoolers. We make it fun by asking them to put two of everything into a boat. Once they have all the animals inside, we lock the door and then we rock the boat up and down (up and down) as we tell our children how it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. When the rains stopped, we set the boat down quietly.

Our children are eager to let the animals out but we stop them. How do we know the flood waters have subsided? We tell our children that Noah released a dove to see if it was safe to open the door. The dove returned with an olive branch in its beak. It was a sign of new life. Finally it was time. As the children get the animals out of the boat we tell them that God told Noah that never again would the world experience that kind of flood. God then made a promise and we are reminded of that promise every time we see a rainbow in the sky.

It is a beautiful story that we tell our children. Even those not well-versed in Scripture have heard about Noah, his ark, and the Flood. It is a story about God's love for all living creatures. It is a story about remembering God's love every time we see a rainbow. In our Faith Formation classes and in the children's books that have been written about the Flood, the children do not hear all the details that lead up to this catastrophic event. At their age, it is a lot to process.

It is for us to hear on this First Sunday in Lent. In the next few minutes we will experience God who judges those who corrupt his good earth. We will also hear the gospel that in the midst of judgment it is God's primary intention to save his people and all of creation.

We start in Genesis 6 when without warning we are confronted by a world that has grown totally corrupt except for one man, named Noah.

Up until now there were instances of individuals sinning and there were some threats of evil but all of a sudden we hear of this sweeping condemnation of all flesh. God saw what human beings were doing to each other and it grieved God. The writer of our story leaves us with no doubt that the actions of God are justified. The writer also leaves us with no doubt on how it affected God. Our God is not a vengeful God. When confronted with hearts that are filled with evil, God grieves and God laments.

Listen carefully because the good news has already started to unfold by the time we get to Genesis 8. In the very first verse it reads that *God remembered Noah*. In the Hebrew, for God to remember does not suggest that God forgot anything or anybody. It is the word used to signal that God determined that it was time for God to act. We learn today on this First Sunday in Lent that in spite of our sins, God insists on finding someone to save that will then provide a means of salvation for all. God insists on preserving a world where a remnant may live. Chaos may prevail for a little while but then God will act decisively.

It is in the nature of God to save. It is in the nature of God to create. Rather than destroy all things, God determined to wipe the slate clean and start all over again with those who followed his commands. And once everyone was back on solid ground, God made an unbelievable promise. What is unique about this particular promise is that it is the only covenant in the Old Testament that includes more than human beings.

On one side stands God and on the other side stands everything else. This is not a covenant just with Noah. God included every living creature and all the generations to follow which means it also includes us.

Yes, our sin must be dealt with and evil must be crushed but God intends to find another way to save us outside of a total destruction. Disasters will still threaten us and chaos will still enter our lives at any moment. We will still experience the impact of flood waters. But this covenant that God made is God's assurance that there will always be hope and there will always be life at the end of our storms.

The most striking element of this covenant is that there is nothing that we can do to ensure that the covenant remains in force. It is very different from the covenant made with Israel at Mt. Sinai that required obedience from the people. The covenant with Noah is more like those of Abraham and David. In none of them do we find any indication that they could do anything that could reverse the outcome. God is the one who maintains each of these covenants by his own faithfulness.

It means God is no longer just our Creator; God is our protector. When God bound himself to us in this new way, God also became completely invested in our fate. We came to Ash Wednesday services vulnerable before God and seeking his mercy. Here God makes himself vulnerable before us. God is totally committed to us and deeply invested in our well-being and the well-being of his whole creation. So along with all the qualities we know about God (his power and justice and love and patience) we can add to our list that God is self-giving.

We know all too well that the flood waters did not cleanse the human heart of sin. But God knows this and God enters into this covenant with us anyway. God will seek us and search us out. Whatever is in our hearts that keeps us from trusting in God, God will not give up loving us.

This is where we start our Lenten journey. This first Old Testament covenant foreshadows the limits that Jesus Christ will put on himself as he willingly goes to the cross. It prefigures the sacrifice Jesus will make when he surrenders his freedom so that we might be set free. Lent is a journey to this other side of God. The all-powerful and almighty God came down in human form to enter into the weakness and vulnerability of humanity. God in Christ sealed our relationship more fully by embracing all of our experiences, even death.

Our text for today invites us to think more deeply about our relationship with others and with all of creation. If God (who alone has the right to grieve, judge, and destroy) surrenders this holy prerogative so that we might remain forever in relationship with him, might not we who have tasted his mercy do the same?

What an extraordinary promise for us to live into. If we were to take this seriously and intentionally, it would profoundly change us. Our hearts would be recreated in the image of God's heart. We would be partners with God and be patient, forgiving, and loving for the sake of the other and for the sake of all living creatures.

It is good that we teach our young children the story of Noah and the Ark in the way that we do. Soon enough they will understand the backstory and all the different ways that we sin against God and each other. But for now, we can let them know that God will always love them and all living creatures. We can let them know this is a story to remember every time they see a rainbow in the sky. Amen