

Stories about Noah's Ark, the flood and creation of the rainbow are common to most cultures and are frequent subjects for children's books. It is my guess that most of us here today have heard some version of these stories from childhood.

Here are some interesting cultural beliefs about rainbows:

- Many cultures all over the world believed that rainbows led to God. Some tribes of North American Indians called the rainbow a "Pathway of Souls."
- In Japan, some refer to a rainbow as the "Floating Bridge of Heaven."
- In Hawaii and Polynesia, legends call the rainbow the "path to the underworld."
- Legends of the people of the Austrian Alps say righteous souls go to heaven via the rainbow.
- Legends of New Zealand say that dead chiefs went up a rainbow to the afterlife.

As a starting point for considering the significance of the text, it is helpful to approach the story of the flood as a metaphor. It is meant to be representative of a larger story that contains lasting truth about the realities of life. In a book called *Crisis and Story*, this concept is clearly expressed. "They (the stories) must be studied first and foremost as stories of the struggle of believing individuals and communities to express and live their faith in clear-sighted engagement with their present realities...for people in search of identity, directions and goals."

First of all, this part of the Noah story is about God's establishing a permanent covenant with human beings and all life on earth. This covenant is initiated by God in response to His desire to preserve life despite human beings' history of violence, injustice and disorder. Through the symbolism of the rainbow, God is taking the initiative to promise not ever to abandon the created order. This does not mean that from that point on, everything was going to be in good order and injustice would not ever rear its ugly head. There are two parts to most covenants: there is the promise and then there is the corresponding response of the recipients of the covenant.

To look more closely at the response that is required, go back to the reason that Noah was selected to build the ark and survive the flood. God saw that Noah was “righteous before me in this generation.” In other words, Noah led a faithful life in keeping with God’s commandments. The other telling statement is that “Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him.” On the surface, one might wonder if Noah did not question what he was asked to do considering the enormity of the project, not to mention the fact that he was to build a ship that size nowhere near any body of water. Arguments about the accuracy of the Noah story have occupied many a scholar’s time and energy. But the main point remains: God delivers a promise and to the best of our ability we need to respond. Notice I say we need to respond. Whether then or now, accepting accountability for what has been entrusted to us is implied. We need to demonstrate responsible stewardship of all the created order. God made the promise not just to human beings but to the living creatures and to the earth.

Looking at our cumulative human history, the conditions that prompted the frustration of God with human beings have not improved. We still have corruption, violence and greed that eats away at our better instincts. It does not take looking at the evening news very often to see that not much has changed.

God in his wisdom saw the need for an ongoing new covenant relationship between himself and human beings. God, in His grace, saw fit to provide us with a living human being that would embody all that God ordained in a covenant relationship. Christ, through his life, death and resurrection provides another opportunity, a new covenant with human beings. And as Peter says in the New Testament reading, just as Noah and his descendants were saved through water, we are now able to become recipients of this new covenant through baptism. The reciprocal covenant relationship still holds. We are to respond by living our lives in keeping with God’s will.

It is one thing to give assent to these ideas, but quite another thing to make the positive changes that reflect that we have not only heard the message but that we have internalized them. Looking back at the enormity of what Noah was asked to do should give us pause. He was to go against the grain so to speak and certainly his actions would have generated criticism and disbelief. Yet, and this is key: he went about the project and followed God’s instructions.

What might we be called upon to do to live up to our covenant promises? It seems to me at least, that we have become slaves to consumerism. We grasp at more goods and services, the latest in technology and more is always better. It is almost like an addiction. But the price we pay is the using up of resources faster than we can maintain them. If we are to protect our resources, serious consideration needs to be given to examining the consequences of depleting our natural resources.

As recipients of God's grace, how are we personally to respond as part of our covenant, our promise to God? First of all, we need to cultivate the willingness to listen for God's promptings through the Holy Spirit. What are some of the unmet needs facing us in our community? Soon we will have an opportunity to hear what community leaders are saying about affordable housing needs. We may very well ask ourselves, what are we to do? Another need is related to mental health. Are we taking care of the people at both ends of the spectrum who are dealing with depression? Youth are suffering from depression and there is an upswing in teen suicide. Our older population face depression over loss of loved ones and over leaving homes they have maintained for decades. These are but two examples of unmet needs; you likely have your own list. My point is this: if we are to live as covenant people, we each have some contribution we can make to lessen the suffering of others or to strengthen the fabric of our communities. It takes prayer and a willingness to listen for the answers. One can trust in the Holy Spirit. If you get repeated "reminders" that you are to go somewhere or do something, pay attention. You may be getting some direction from God for your part in the bigger Godly plan.

There is one guarantee: God will not abandon us in our attempts to lead Godly lives. Think about that the next time you see a rainbow or the next time you take part in communion.