

“The Sign of God”, Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15 (Feb 21, 2021)

(Slide 1) You may know an old and very famous pop song, “Tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old Oak tree.” Originally, this song was released by Tony Orlando in 1973, but it was rereleased many times by other singers. Anyway, you may remember this song if you listen to it. Let’s have time to listen to some parts of this song together! It is really fun to listen to popular music during the pastor’s sermon. **(Slide 2)** This song is about one prisoner’s love story. The story is like this: There is a prisoner who has “done his time” but is uncertain if his love still loves him and welcomes his return. He writes to her, asking her to tie a yellow ribbon around the “old oak tree” in front of her house, if she wants him to return to her life. But if he does not see such a ribbon, he will remain on the bus and understand her reasons. He asks the bus driver to check, fearful of not seeing anything. To his amazement, the entire bus cheers the response – there are 100 yellow ribbons around the tree, a sign that she still loves him a lot and welcomes his return.

(Slide 3) With the impact of this song, in 1979, during the Iran hostage crisis, the yellow ribbon was used as a symbol of support for the hostage held at the United States embassy in Tehran, Iran. And this symbolism continued and gained further recognition in numerous ways. Especially, in the early 1990s, during the Gulf War, yellow ribbons appeared along with the slogan “support our troops.” And these days, across the world, to tie a yellow ribbon is considered as a sign, showing support, sorrow or empathy, and caring and love.

By the way, like a yellow ribbon, do you have anything of your own that is a sign, reminding you of something special? **(Slide 4)** It can be a certain color, food, fragrance, action, or scar on your body or natural phenomenon. Let us consider an easy example, a wedding ring. When you see a ring on someone’s ring finger, you regard that person as engaged or married.

In today’s scripture, Genesis 9:8-17, God established the covenant between God and Noah and every living creature on the earth, and God set

a rainbow as the sign of the covenant. **(Slide 5)** Before this story, we see the dreadful judgment of God by the flood. But, to have a right understanding about the story of the great flood, we have to know both sides of this story. The great flood shows not only about the wrath of God but also about the comfort of God. It shows the wrath of God toward the people who disregarded God's command, so we know that when the time of judgment comes, they will be punished by God. However, at the same time, it also shows the comfort of God toward the people who are righteous, blameless, and walking with God like Noah, so we know that even in the final judgment, they will be protected by God forever. In verse 11, God promised Noah that "never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God initiates our salvation and covenant relationship with God. Although we do not find God, God finds us, calls us, and God saves us. We have to remember that we are saved by divine grace, not by our human initiative. God made the rainbow a symbol not of destruction but of deliverance. It was to be a reminder of God's gracious covenant with Noah and with us. In verse 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" As the sign, the rainbow reminds us of the existence of God and our covenantal relationship with God. In the song, "Tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old Oak tree," 100 yellow ribbons on the Oak tree were signs of the woman's unchanging love for the prisoner. Although 3 years had already passed, she still loves him a lot and waits for his return. And in the flood story, the rainbow is not only the sign of the everlasting covenant but also the sign of God's divine grace and unqualified love toward God's people. It shows God's ultimate guarantee of his presence with and for his creatures.

(Slide 6) And it signifies God's steadfast love and divine mercy for all the living creatures on the earth. Furthermore, today we see another one of God's signs in the Gospel scripture. Through baptism, Jesus answered the summons and the challenge of God, and he identified himself as the son of God with God's approval by a voice that came from heaven. Also, while he was baptized the Holy Spirit descended upon him, so he was equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit. From this, we think that now Jesus is fully ready to start his public ministry. However, that was not the

end. In Mark 1:12, “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.” Imagine that if you knew you would be tempted by Satan in the wilderness for forty days right after your baptism, who would dare to be baptized? What images come to your mind when you think of the image of wilderness? You might come up with something like bleak desert, barrenness, wasteland death, destruction, decadence, danger, risk and conflict. Although we commonly relate wilderness to all kinds of tough images, in the Old Testament for the people of Israel, wilderness means something very special. Wilderness was the place to face a divine test, but through the test they could meet the living presence of God. It also is the place where exiled Israelites meet God, and where Moses received the Ten Commandments, which was the wilderness of Sinai. In the wilderness, they were separated from their ordinary life, but they could meet God there as they were tested and disciplined by God.

(Slide 7) Last week, we talked about Jesus as the best superhero, but today, gospel scripture shows us another Jesus who was tested, tempted, and disciplined just as we are. In Hebrews 4:15-16, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Our God does not just oversee and punish us from afar, but God came to us as Jesus to be with us in our midst. Since he already experienced all our hardship, pain, suffering, tests, and temptations, he knows us, and he understands us. Our God does not just let us off adversity, but he leads us to pass it by with faith and perseverance. Temptation and suffering are not sent to us to make us fall, but they are sent to strengthen our minds, hearts and souls. In the face of adversities, we have to remember that they are not meant for our ruin, but for our good. They are meant to be tests from which we emerge better warriors and athletes of God. Even though Jesus spent a difficult time in the wilderness, as he faithfully made it through, he finally changed the wilderness to the sign of his great victory.

(Slide 8) Last Wednesday, we had the Ash Wednesday service. As we

begin our forty days journey of Lent, we drew a cross using ash on our forehead to remember who we are and where we are going back. As the Ash cross reminds us, we are dust, and we shall return to dust. Indeed, the cross is another one of God's signs. It reminds us not only about Jesus' pain, suffering, and death but also about the glory, victory, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Think about the scar on your body, when you see your scar, it reminds you of what you have gone through along with your pain and suffering in the past, but it also reminds you of how you have gone through it. Now, that scar has become the evidence of overcoming, recovery and rehabilitation to you. It is the sign of victory. Likewise, during this season of Lent, I encourage you to find the sign of God which reminds you of how God saved you, how God loved you, how God raised you, how God filled you with the Holy Spirit, how God led you out from the darkness, how God healed you, how God transformed you and changed your life, and how God made you free from all the temptations. And, if you feel that now you are in the middle of the wilderness, don't worry, God is with you in the midst of your pain and suffering. And God will change it to another sign of victory.

(Slide 9) For the prisoner, it was a "Yellow ribbon." For us, it is the rainbow, wilderness, and cross. See where else you can find the sign of God. Have you already found it, or do you never find it? What kind of the sign has God given you and will give you? Remember it and wait for it in anticipation, God reminds you and will show you the sign of God!

Praise God. Amen.