

Covenant with You

Genesis 9:8-17

One day a young mother was taking a walk with her small son and they saw a rainbow. The four-year-old boy looked up in wonder and said, "Mommy, can we take that home and put it in our house?" His awestruck question prompted the mother to write a poem she titled "A Rainbow in My House." She took her son's question literally, imagining what it would be like to have a rainbow in their house, on their walls, spilling out from the windows and doors, coming out the chimney. The house was transformed, and it could not contain the glory of the rainbow and its colors.

What does the body of Christ look like in the light of the rainbow? What would it mean for our Christian community to put God's "rainbow in our house"?

God's bow in the heavens is the sign of the first covenant that God made with humankind and with all creation. It is a sign that God is a changed (and changing) God. God's grief over the resistance of the human heart to God's ways first resulted in destructive anger, in a worldwide flood. God sought to wipe out creation and start over with the righteous remnant that was found in Noah, his family, and the animals in the ark. When the flood had subsided, God saw that retribution had not resolved the issue. God's heart was still grieving, still broken over humankind's hard-heartedness. Punishment had not forced or even encouraged humans into changing our ways. But God wanted to stay in relationship with creation and with humankind—the creatures made in the image of God—then God decided to do something different. God repented, turned from demanding justice from His creation to

forgiveness, patience, and steadfast love for creation and for humanity, despite God's knowledge that the human heart may never change or often will not change. The creatures made in God's image may always resist God. In spite of this God vowed, "never ... never ... never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (vv. 11, 15). So God laid down God's weapons against creation, against humankind. God put the undrawn bow in the clouds as a divine reminder "never again" to destroy creation with a flood. In the light of that bow, the rainbow, humanity can see God as the one who covenants with us and "One Who Remembers," even in the midst of chaos, even in the midst of rebellion by creation and its creatures.

Some scholars believe our story of God's rainbow covenant was recorded by the people of Israel in the midst of exile from their homeland, in the midst of chaos for their community. Chaos is, of course, not only an ancient occurrence. As a world; as a nation; as a community; as a church; as a congregation, as a family; we know chaos in our twenty-first-century world through terrorism and war, through ecological and natural disasters, and through the gross inequity of the distribution of resources and wealth among the world's many peoples. Individually, chaos comes into our lives through relationships broken by death, estrangement, and divorce, through illness of body or mind, through addictions of all kinds. Much of this chaos we bring on ourselves, through our resistance to God's ways. To see and know God as the one who covenants with us and the "One Who Remembers" us, corporately and individually, with love and forgiveness in the midst of life's chaos with all its pain and suffering, is to discover redemption. We hear this story on this first Sunday of Lent as we begin our walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem, understanding in a deeper, fuller way the God who sent him and whom he served.

The rainbow bending over Noah's ark with its doors wide open and spilling out pairs of animals into a new world is an image painted or hung on the walls of many a church nursery. We offer this story as a message of God's love and hope to our children, starting at the earliest ages. It is telling that we want them to know that, even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget them. But we all need to hear this story of God's love and remember it in all that we do...in our worship...in our service...in the ways we conduct our business...in our relationships within the church and outside the church...in our interaction with the natural world...and even in our fellowship dinners.

What an extraordinary promise for the body of Christ! Taken seriously and intentionally, it can profoundly change our faith community. Not into a utopia, but into a place where people are willing to let our hearts be remade in the image of God's heart; a place where we let our hearts be broken open, with grief over our own hard-heartedness and the hard-heartedness of the world and its chaos. And when our hearts are broken open we will be moved to partner with our Creator through patient, forgiving, loving, and prophetic action for the renewal of all creation.

In the light of God's rainbow promise, our church can become a place where conflict is taken seriously and respectfully and not "swept under the rug." Methods of nonviolent conflict resolution and restorative justice will be explored for the health of our congregation, as well as in reaching out to a world of conflict and violence. Our church can become a community that seeks transparency in our corporate and individual relationships and clarity in our internal and external communications. We, as the church, can respond to God's call to be a place where "all the colors of the rainbow" are welcome and equal in God's sight, in terms of race, age, gender, ability, and social

status. We in this church can seek constructive dialogue with communities of other faiths or communities on the other side of denominational or doctrinal divides. Previously unimaginable partnerships may be formed, and reconciliation may blossom. The patience and forgiveness spilling forth from our hearts broken open by God's love may paint the walls of our church, color us as its people, and spill out from our doors and windows into the world. We simply need to ask the question with wonder like that of the child: "Can we take that rainbow home and put it in our house?" **Jane Anne Ferguson**

We can take the rainbow home when we remember this covenant reveals the unity of all creation; that we have been given undeserved blessings; and all creation's total dependence is upon God's active compassion. Therefore we, like Noah and his family, can "abound on the earth and multiply in it" (9:1, 7).

God's purpose for a unified, harmonious cosmos remains in conflict with humanity's corrupting influence. Lent recognizes this imbalance, giving us a means to seek restoration by embracing our sin and mortality. We can repent, accept our finitude, and stop grasping for control, or we can continue the violence.

The answer is found by those of us who follow Christ and travel the rocky way of Lent through the chaos of Good Friday and the silent void of the grave where we find hope to see Easter dawn, whose light will reveal a rainbow in the dark western sky behind us. **Wm. Loyd Allen**