



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 10

July 28, 2024

The Meaning of the Bow

Genesis 9:8–17

⁸ God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²And 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When 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.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

You all know the story well. The earth, created in perfection by God, had become corrupt. This corruption began before we ever left the Garden. Adam and Eve transgressed the Law of God, ate the forbidden fruit, fell into sin, and were exiled from Eden so that they would not eat from the Tree of Life and live forever in their sin, separated from their holy and righteous God for all eternity. God be praised, He knew in His infinite wisdom that this would happen, and already had a plan in place; a plan to send His Son, who would redeem mankind from its fallenness and rescue us from everlasting condemnation, thus reconciling us to Himself, so that we can now look forward to an eternity *with* God, instead of without Him.

But, despite this Good News, not all of Adam’s descendants came along with him. Cain, for example, the first human born into this world, became the first murderer, killing his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy. Clearly, the human race, though given the opportunity to be redeemed, was still infected with sin, and many chose to live apart from God, despite His heroic efforts on our behalf.

By the time of Noah, corruption had filled the earth. Though Noah himself was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, as apparently were the members of his family, the rest of mankind were “corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.



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And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in [it], and cover it inside and out with pitch.’”

And Noah followed God’s detailed instructions, building this giant boat according to God’s command, in order to bring “two of every living thing of all flesh, of every sort into the ark to keep them alive. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to keep them alive.” And “Noah did all that God commanded him.”

And, after a solid year of being on the ark, Noah and his family, and all the animals that were with him, came out of the ark and began the arduous task of repopulating the planet.

Which brings us to today’s Old Testament, in which God makes a covenant with Noah, saying, “‘Never again will I curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.’ And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

God also gave Noah instructions regarding food – for instance, now they could eat animals in addition to fruits and vegetable – and punishment, for He said: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” – and He repeated His command to them to “be fruitful and multiply, that you may increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”

And finally, God said this to Noah:

“I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. 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. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 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. This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

We often teach our children that the rainbow is a sign of God’s covenant never again to destroy the earth by flooding. This bow can certainly be considered a sign from God to us, but that’s not exactly what God says here, is it. He actually says, “When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, *I* will remember my covenant that is



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between me and you and every living creature.” So the rainbow is not only a sign to *us* of the covenant God has made, but it’s a sign to *Him* as well. When He sees the rainbow, He is reminded of the promise He made to Noah and all his descendants. It’s a sign both to Him and to us of His mercy and care for all living creatures on the earth.

Now, it would be pointless to speculate as to God’s feelings about how His bow is commonly used in our culture. Certainly, it has been co-opted by those whose intent is rarely, if ever, to remind us of God’s grace. So fully have they established a new meaning for the rainbow that Christians often hesitate to display it for fear of being misunderstood, fear of sending a message of support for the sin so widely celebrated in our time. That concern is quite understandable.

But let us, at least in our own minds, remember that Noah carried in his body the “seed of the woman,” the promised Savior, who would come to shed His blood for the sin of Adam and all his descendants – the sins of those rebellious and unrepentant in Noah’s day, and the sins of every generation since, including your sins and mine. For Jesus is the true Sign of the covenant, who was lifted up in payment for all sins for all people for all time, provided they turn in faith to Him, whose banner declared God’s mercy as no rainbow ever could. What that bow pointed forward to was the raising up of the Son of God on the cross in fulfillment of God’s promise that He would crush the serpent’s head in victory over sin, death, and hell.

While it’s good to have a reminder such as we have in today’s Old Testament, it is also good, and perhaps even better, to know that the promise of God’s grace was made good in Jesus, who says to us, as He said to His disciples on that stormy sea, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid, beloved, of judgment over your sins; Jesus has paid for them. Do not be afraid of a world that twists the truth of God’s Word; Jesus *is* the Word, who stood strong against the twisting lies of the devil himself in the days of His temptation. Do not be afraid, for as Paul writes in today’s Epistle, He “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we can ask or think, according to His power at work within us.” And He exercises this power, first and foremost, in reconciling you to the Father by the forgiveness of your sins in His blood.

So, when next you see the rainbow, whether it’s in the sky or on some sinner’s flag, remember not only God’s promise to Noah, remember His promise to Adam and to you, the promise of Jesus, your Savior, who loves you and gave Himself into death for you. And pray for those who misuse the sign, that they will have their eyes opened by the power of His Spirit, that they, too, will come to repent of their sins, and one day with us “give glory to Him in the church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen