

The God Who Won't Let Go (1): Rainbow in the Rain

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Genesis 9:8-17

Roy G Biv. Do you recognize that name? Roy G Biv—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. You will always know the colors of the rainbow in correct sequence if you remember Roy G Biv. All the colors encompassing the entire spectrum of refracted light. The bowed arc brightening a rain-soaked sky was appropriated by the Judeo-Christian tradition as a sign of God's everlasting covenant with the whole created order. The rainbow stoles gracing the shoulders of some Fairmount leaders this morning are meant to recall the sign made to Noah and his family long, long ago, and its meaning for the faith community today.

Even the youngest Sunday School child knows the biblical story. How God taps righteous Noah to build an enormous ark, and fills it with a pair of all known species of animals, which will enable them—and Noah's family—to escape torrential rains that destroy everything (and everyone) else. What we don't often emphasize is the reason for all this in the first place: God's judgment upon human violence and corruption. Surveying the brokenness, suffering, and evil the "good" creation has brought upon itself, God decides to cleanse the earth by destroying it. God grieves. Rains fall like divine tears upon the whole earth, but God makes provision for a remnant, a family of humans and animals, to survive and begin anew. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Genesis, in the ninth chapter, at the eighth verse, just as Noah and his family step out of the ark onto dry land.

[GENESIS 9:8-17]

Noah may offer us some useful advice in these uncertain economic times, since apparently he was able to float his stock while everyone else was in liquidation. :~)) But seriously, folks, this story from our faith tradition's earliest history is one of the first attempts to understand God's ways. Despite questions it raises about the nature of a God who would purposefully set about to destroy the flawed creation—not unlike a frustrated child angrily coloring over a picture she is unhappy with---the arc of this story bends toward a God who is intimately involved with creation and acts to redeem it.

The beauty of the rainbow is never more intense than against a backdrop of gray clouds heavy with rain. God's judgment is mediated through God's grace to establish a permanent relationship between God and the creation. *I make my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood. . . .I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you and every living creature.* The rainbow offers compelling evidence that God's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, spanning human history with the promise of peace. Despite our continuing impulse toward violence—personally and interpersonally, individually and as human communities---God has not given up on us, but persists in reaching out with healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.

An intriguing feature of the covenant with Noah is its unilateral dimension. It's all about God. Did you notice how the rainbow is a reminder *to God* of the promise? God declares, "*I will see it and remember.*" When we glimpse a rainbow in the rain, we can rejoice that God decided against strict --albeit fair--retribution for our behavior, and instead resolves to keep faith with the world and its inhabitants.

The rainbow arcs long, extending all the way to the cross. There, once more, God suffers for the sins of the beloved creation. There, once more, God's heart breaks. And there, once and for all, sin is destroyed--- not by water, but by blood, and by the self-giving love of One who simply won't let us go.

And not just “us.” God made the rainbow covenant with the whole world—“all flesh”---a vision of peace as wide as the world, that encompasses the entire spectrum of human conditions. I suspect no other covenant has been more difficult to keep. The human family seems bound and determined to invent categories and structures and belief systems to keep its members separate.

The specificity of Fairmount’s Diversity Statement is designed to help us remember God’s universal love and the essential unity of creation’s disparate parts. *As beloved children of God we welcome all persons to join our family of faith as full participants, regardless of age, race or ethnicity, national origin, economic status, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, differences of thought and expression, or any other human condition. We celebrate and find strength in our diversity.* Yet even that statement reflects some of the tension around keeping the rainbow covenant. Those “differences of thought and expression” include ones held by beloved members uncomfortable with making diversity front and center, and who experience disconnection rather than synergy from its explicit focus. Let’s be honest: it is much easier to write a diversity statement than it is to live it. But I believe with all my heart that it is worth every effort, every searching conversation, every prayer, every attempt to acknowledge difference, really to listen and learn from the other.

The Presbyterian Church also has always struggled with how to demonstrate the rainbow covenant in its community identity and life. For the past forty years, some of those struggles have centered on sexual orientation, and the Church’s resistance to the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons as elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and Sacrament. Last year’s General Assembly recommended the adoption of an amendment to the Church’s Constitution which would remove the categorical bar to ordination for them. A majority of the one hundred seventy six regional bodies must approve the

amendment in order for it to take effect; our presbytery will vote March 23rd.

As you know, the Church is deeply divided on these matters; so much so that a number of congregations across the country have decided to sever their connection with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and have voted to leave the denomination—including Bay Presbyterian Church in our presbytery. Recently another congregation faced a similar decision. Glenville New Life Community Church had expressed deep concerns over perceived differences in biblical and theological understandings with the Presbyterian Church, and opposing perspectives on ordination standards and other issues---what some have called “irreconcilable differences.” Over the past year they have held congregational discussions, Bible studies, and prayer services to discern their path. Tensions were high; most of us feared the outcome would result in another painful divorce. Last Sunday the Glenville congregation voted overwhelmingly to stay with the Presbyterian Church (USA). In a letter sent this week to the other presbytery churches, they explained: *We acknowledge there are things about which we will disagree. . . we do not have to support everything the other one does or stands for, but we can minister together in the name of Jesus. . . .we are stronger together than we are apart. . . [from an e-mail sent 2/24, slightly edited]*

The rainbow covenant is a reminder that our diversity strengthens rather than weakens us. We celebrate it because that’s the way God made creation and relates to it. It’s a beautiful reality! As we journey onward through the Lenten season, let us trace the rainbow through the rain; be they storms of controversy, floods of economic trial, tears of personal sadness and grief. Then let mighty waters flow down, but let them be streams of justice; flooding the earth and the church with gratitude, compassion, and hope. TO THE GLORY OF GOD. AMEN.

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