

Genesis 9: 8-17
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In the beginning. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God created the waters and dry land. God created every plant and animal to live upon the dry land and in the sea. And God created humanity, made in God's image.

God flurried about in a creative furor and then rested. Rested from such an outpouring of spirit, energy, matter. I picture God stepping back from the canvas and smiling. Or rocking back on God's heels in order to get perspective on the glory of what had just transpired. God rested, and what I hear in that, is that God took a little time out from everything going on down here on earth.

Sure. There were moments that followed. Adam and Eve in the garden. Cain and Abel in the field. Even the tower constructed at Babel. But in each of these examples, God swoops in with a definitive word and then swoops back out. Can you see the cape swirling behind as the superhero leaves the stage?

And then we arrive at the flood. And more particularly, the conversation God has with Noah and Noah's offspring *after* the flood. This is a critical moment in the development of humanity's relationship with God the Creator. For in this turning of heart, God becomes God the Protector. No longer is God at an arm's length from the canvas, sighing with pleasure over what has been created. Instead, God recognizes that what has been created requires ongoing relationship.

This is a remarkable turn of events, friends. This is the first step toward the incarnation of God among us. In this promise that God makes with Noah we are thrown into a whole new depth of connection with God.

And not just us, but *all* of creation. It sets an expansive blueprint moving forward. Its a covenant not just those of us who believe in the right things. Or even those of us that have sentient thought. *Every* living creature upon the face of the earth is offered this promise by God. In other words, God steps into the canvas and becomes engaged with all of life - all that God has declared good.

The people who were first offered this story of God's promise had been exiled from their homeland and from their religious practices. They had lived for over fifty years in Babylon and, coming home to the land of their parents and grandparents, they needed an anchor. They needed reassurance that such chaos would not reign again in their lives. And if it did, they needed to know that God's hand would not be to blame.

As an effort to comfort and reassure their people, the priestly story tellers of post-exile Israel offered this version of the flood narrative. Stories of the great flood were abundant throughout this time and land. And those returning to Israel had heard it told in word and art throughout their captivity.

And so the priests took what was common and known and knit a new people together. This flood narrative of Noah offered a different way into the future.

God hangs up the bow of war. Hangs it way up in the sky so that all might see and know that the promise is good. That such levels destruction and devastation would not ever be wreaked upon creation again.

In crafting the flood story in this way, the priests are reminding their people that they may know hardship, struggle, and even persecution again. Their lives may be thrown upside down. They may be captives and the religious practices that have grounded them for centuries may be

ground into dust, just like their beloved temple. but it will clearly only be the hands of humans will bring destruction beyond compare.

It will not be the hand of God who brings such oppression and hardship.

In this story, through this covenant, the people are reminded that God is awake and present. God has stepped into relationship with creation and has promised never to back out again.

No requirements are placed upon humanity - or any living creature for that matter. There is nothing we have to do to hold up this agreement. For it is simply God's promise to all of us.

That we in turn can do with what we will.

And that's the question that sits before us today and every day since this promise. That is the question the priests asked those returning from exile.

What will you do with this powerful knowledge?

Will you use it as reassurance that anything goes? God's hand has been stayed and thus I have full allowance on what I might do and who I might use.

Or will you use it for good? Will it shape how you view and use creation? Will it determine the ways in which you use your resources and allocate goods for all?

The Israelites, facing the struggles of rebuilding a nation, asked themselves this question again and again as this story was told.

And so it has been gifted throughout the centuries - generation after generation having to wrestle with the implications of this divine gift. Sometimes with generous and self-sacrificing hearts. And sometimes, perhaps many times, not.

But each day we get to ask this question anew: Will we give thanks for the bow in the sky with our whole lives? Will we let it shape our decisions? Help us act responsibly toward all creation?

Will it empower us to eradicate malaria and turn from dependence on fossil fuels? Will we be able to use the promise offered in this story, the covenant from God, to in turn live a life of promise for *all* of creation?

We are told that we are made in the image of God. God, the Protector, hanging the bow in the clouds, asks us today and every day, will you? Will you be protectors alongside me?

Amen.