

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, B
Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

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A mom I know was talking about what a revelation it can be when she goes to dust off the tip top surface of their living room bookcase. She finds all kinds of things stashed up there on top of the high bookshelf – things like Nerf guns and Harry Potter wands and Star Wars light sabers and plastic swords. They get put up there when playtime gets too rambunctious and finally a parent declares, “That’s enough- I’m taking that thing away before somebody gets hurt!” If all goes well, they get forgotten up there for a while, and things cool down. I’m pretty sure every household with kids has a tip top shelf like this.

It comes to mind in connection with our Old Testament lesson, the end of the Noah’s Ark story. The great flood began when God looked at the earth and saw how corrupt and violent human beings had become, and God said, “I’m sorry I ever created them! I’m going to destroy all of this— the people, the animals, everything.” It’s harsh, but there is grace in the story too. God sends a terrible flood, but God makes special arrangements to save Noah and his family and animals of every species on the Ark. It turns out God really can’t bear to destroy all these creatures God has made. So God devises a way to begin again.

And when the rains are past and dry land appears, God makes a new covenant with all living things and God promises, “I will never destroy the earth again.” God seals the promise with a symbolic action, “setting his bow in the clouds.” That is, God takes God’s bow and arrow, the weapons of war, and sets them up in the sky so they can never be used again. It’s something like the parent who sets the pirate swords and Star Wars light sabers on top of the bookshelf, only God does one better. God doesn’t just put that war-bow out of reach. God displays it on the living room wall of the world, right out in plain sight, as a binding promise that this kind of violence will never happen again. Whenever we see a rainbow in the sky, we’re meant to remember God’s promise to make peace.

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, makes an observation I find mind-bending. He says that in the Old Testament he sees God portrayed as a “recovering rage-a-holic.” That is, there was a time when God acted out of rage and anger and judgment against people. But throughout scripture we see God changing, we see God putting that violent behavior behind. It begins right here, when God hangs up God’s weapon and says, “Anger will no longer be my way. I will no longer respond to the world’s problems with violence.” And God’s resolve continues developing all the way through to a climax in Jesus, where God refuses to resort to violence against those who are endangering God’s Son. Instead, in Jesus, on the cross, God

willingly becomes the *victim* of violence, and in that surprising, transforming way, God saves us all. In Christ's life and teaching, we are led away from anger and vengeance and into a relationship where *love* rules and *peace* is the norm.

God's commitment to peace is not based on whether or not we're good enough. It is *God's* choice to make peace. God's peace toward us is a free gift with no strings attached. And this gift of peace becomes personal for us in Christ. Scripture says that since we are made right with God in Christ, we have peace with God. We are no longer condemned by God in any way. Whatever anxiety we might have about things we've done in the past – things that were foolish or misguided or wrong – God does not hold judgment against us. That doesn't mean there are no consequences for our actions in this life. But God no longer holds judgment. Instead, God wants us to live in this enduring relationship of peace, to know peace with God and be transformed by it completely.

The sign of the rainbow means *peace* even today. A "rainbow coalition" is one that unites people across divisions of race and class. When you see a rainbow logo, it means all people are welcome without regard to sexual orientation. The rainbow stands for a strong and enduring commitment to diversity and to peace.

A rainbow witnessed in nature can also speak to us in a strong and awe-inspiring way. This week I was driving along I-5 between rainstorms, and looking across the city I could see a magnificent rainbow slashing down in front of dark grey clouds. It was absolutely brilliant, colored in jewel tones, such a stunning sight that it actually slowed down traffic on the freeway. It looked for all the world like a sign from God, connecting the heavens above to the earth below.

Scripture says the rainbow is precisely that – a sign of God's enduring relationship with all the earth. And notice, God's covenant is not made only with human beings, but with "every living creature... for all future generations." God has made an enduring commitment to the welfare of the animals, the plants, the insects, the fish, and every being on this earth. So the rainbow becomes a powerful ecological challenge too. As caretakers of this planet, we're called to let our relationship to the whole world reflect God's overarching covenant and God's enduring concern.

The season of Lent is a good time to focus on all the relationships that are encompassed in that sign of the rainbow. To deepen our relationship with God, our relationships with other people, and our relationship with the natural world. We can think of Lent as a time to live into our own covenants in a more committed way.

These first days of Lent are an opportunity to settle into one or more disciplines that can support and deepen these relationships. We could start by considering the traditional disciplines of Lent, which include fasting, prayer, and good works.

Fasting can mean literally going without food. It's an ancient practice for purifying the body and focusing the spirit. It can also deepen our relationship with the earth and its people. Many people have taken up the practice of fasting for a meal or for a day as a way to be in solidarity with hungry people around the world, saving up the money they would have spent on food and giving it instead to feed others.

Fasting can also have the wider meaning of *giving up something*. Not necessarily for the purpose of depriving yourself but rather as a way of *setting aside* something that is hindering your life or your faith, setting aside a habit or a practice or an attitude or even a substance that is getting in the way.

We can ask ourselves: what do we need to *set aside* this Lent? Like the war-bow set up in the sky by a God who says, no more rage and violence... Like the Nerf guns and Star Wars light sabers that have become a distraction to the household and so are put away on that high shelf for a time... During Lent, a person could focus on *setting aside* the habit of losing their temper. Or set aside resentment. Or set aside gossiping. Or complaining. Or even impulsive spending. A person could resolve to set aside smoking or another addiction that has become a barrier to the full and free life God intends for us. A person could resolve to quit wasting energy – start turning off lights that aren't being used, combine car trips to save fossil fuels, try to eliminate one wasteful habit. Lent is an opportunity to try on some new pattern of behavior that can put us in better relationship with God, with others, and with the natural world.

Or perhaps the Lenten discipline you embrace will not be *giving something up* but rather *adding something* to your life. Maybe you'll set a goal for walking or exercising. Or make that doctor appointment you've been putting off, to take care of the body God has given you. Maybe you will turn your hand to works of love, acts of charity, volunteering to improve the lives of others. Maybe you'll give a financial gift. Maybe you will choose one relationship that needs to improve, and take concrete steps to make it better. Write a letter. Take someone to lunch to talk. Maybe you will add a prayer discipline to your day, in the morning or evening, opening your heart to God, praying for others. I hope you will worship with us every Sunday in Lent, and Holy Week services too. And I hope you will join us here at church on Wednesday evenings, for a soup supper and evening prayer and lively conversation around valuable themes of faith.

Lent is a gift of time, a whole season to practice a new way. God has made peace with us. And in every way that we turn our hearts toward God, God desires to meet

us and touch our lives with that peace -- and lead us more deeply into the life that really is life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.