

Ashes and Rainbows

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Genesis 9:8-13 — Then God said to Noah and to his children with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you, and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." 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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

The story of Noah and the ark is one of the oldest and most well-known stories in the Bible—and not just in the Bible, but really in the world. It's important to know, when we read this story in our Bibles, that it isn't the only version of the story out there. There were other ancient cultures, besides the Israelites, who told an extraordinary tale about a flood from on high that covered the earth and that only a few survived. The details of the story varied from culture to culture, of course. And one of the most distinctive features about the biblical narrative, the thing that sets apart the Hebrew tale of Noah from every other similar story, is this morning's passage: the end of the story, where God says, "I am establishing my covenant with you, and your descendants after you, and with every living creature." This morning, I'm not interested in talking about whether or not the whole earth was literally flooded thousands of years ago, or whether the biblical narrative is literal history or myth; instead, I want us to focus on how this story can help us know who God is and can help us grow in our relationship with God.

And to do that, I'd like us to focus on covenants. The word is used for the first time in the Bible here in our passage, and it's used throughout the rest of the Hebrew scriptures and throughout the New Testament, so it's definitely worth a few minutes of our attention here. Essentially, a covenant is an agreement, a promise between two parties, but in the Bible, there's a bit more to it than that: a covenant is a promise in the context of a relationship. It's not a once-and-done type of thing; it's an ongoing, longstanding relational reality—between two individuals, two families, two tribes, or two nations. So, whereas you would make a promise to pay someone back for something, you would make a covenant to go into business with someone. Whereas I would promise to get a bite to eat with you sometime, I would make a covenant to get together and share a meal with you on a regular basis, as we share our lives with one another.

Speaking of meals, that's usually how covenants were made in biblical times. You didn't just say, "Yes, we agree to this covenant" and sign on the dotted line; you actually sat down with someone and ate a meal together as a part of the covenant-making process. Now, in the ancient world, eating a meal meant eating meat. It meant killing an animal—and all of the stomach-churning stuff that comes with that. But while many of us today would be disgusted if we had to kill an

animal in the flesh and then cook and eat it, for the ancient Israelites, the act of killing, cooking, and eating animals was, in a way, sacred, because the Israelites, and other ancient Near Eastern peoples, believed that the spirit of a creature dwelled in its blood. Whether human or other animal, a creature's blood was sacred, because the spirit, or the soul, or the life force of a creature was believed to pulse through its veins. Given that mindset, it makes sense to me that making a meal would be an important part of making a covenant. When they shed an animal's blood and prepared a covenant meal, the partners were marking their covenant as sacred: they were opening up and exposing themselves to a creature's spirit, as they went about the sacred act of connecting their own two spirits, joining the life forces of their own two bodies.

Now, like I said, covenants appear throughout the Bible, both because people make covenants with each other and because God makes covenants with people. The first one comes in this morning's passage, like I said, when God makes a covenant of protection with all of the earth after the flood. Just a few chapters later, God makes a covenant with the person Abraham and his descendants, establishing the future Hebrew people, the Israelite nation. Then, in the next book of Exodus, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, which is part of a covenant between God and the Hebrews after God liberates them from slavery in Egypt. And really, the Jewish faith that continues to this day is rooted in these early covenants with God. In this morning's first reading, which comes hundreds of years after Moses, the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah proclaims that one day God will make a new covenant, in which God's commands are written not on stone, but in our hearts. According to the Christian tradition, this new covenant of which Jeremiah speaks comes to fruition in the person of Jesus—specifically, during Passion Week (the last week of Jesus's life on earth, which we are slowly moving towards in this season of Lent that began on Wednesday). During the Last Supper, shortly before Jesus was crucified, he said to his closest followers, "This cup is the *new* covenant in *my* blood." In other words, at the Last Supper, Jesus promises to be in relationship with us, his followers, and in Jesus, God's own blood is poured out, and we are given God's Spirit. It's this gift, this covenant, that we remember every time we share Communion together. So, from the very beginning of Scripture to the very end of Jesus's life, God is making covenants with us, promising to be in relationship with us, asking us to say "Yes" and to promise in return.

To be frank, friends, this is really weird. I mean, think about it: the almighty God—infinite, transcendent, holy, divine—comes to us human beings with a promise of relationship. But we aren't on any sort of equal footing with God, and so there's all sorts of questions and complications that can arise in this unique, weird relationship. To name just one example, there's no way for us to hold God accountable to God's promises. Let's put it this way: in one of my favorite TV shows ever, Golden Girls, a sitcom from the '80s and '90s, middle-aged Dorothy Zbornak lives with her 80-year-old mother, Sophia Petrillo, and in one episode, after the two of them have had a fight and made up, Dorothy jokes, "Ma, promise me you'll live forever." Sophia pauses, shrugs, and says, "Okay. I promise." Dorothy laughs: "How can you make a promise like that?" To which Sophia responds: "Easy—if I don't come through, what are you gonna do to me?"

And isn't the same thing true of God? If God didn't come through on any of God's promises, what would you or I do? We're just frail, finite creatures, always fully dependent on the God who is reaching out a hand to us. And just like Sophia Petrillo, we are going to die. The dust of which our bodies are made will eventually return to the dust below us now. "Ashes to ashes," the saying goes. I don't know about you, but I think that's a little scary. A little scary like saying "Yes" to a relationship that is so unknown and so beyond our control. A little scary like a story about a God who has the power to flood the entire earth.

But at the end of the scary story, we have a rainbow—a gracious reminder that this almighty, mysterious God is on our side, is asking to love us, is dying to love us. Just as ashes invite us to remember that life is short, and scary, and full of uncertainties and questions (even when it comes to God), so the rainbow invites us to remember the times when God has shown up in the past, in the midst of pain, chaos, and trial. And the rainbow invites us to trust God's promise to keep showing up, to break into our lives when we least expect it, to enter into our hearts and lead us in the ways of Christ, the ways of peace and justice and, above all, love. When life hands you ashes, friends, look around for the rainbows. Amen.