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Genesis 8:20-21, 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

COVENANT OF HOPE

Tim was tidying up the garage recently when he made a discovery. He brought it into the house to show me. This tiny bow was made by our son when he was quite young, using a stick found in the backyard and some twine. I smiled when I saw this bow, thinking about the little boy who made it and that sweet period of our lives when he was passionate, one might even say *obsessed*, about turning sticks into bows or Harry Potter wands. This little bow symbolized that by-gone era of our lives.

We hung the little bow up on a hook on the kitchen wall with the intention of showing it to our now college-aged son the next time we spoke on the phone. But you know how things go. Sometimes items remain where they are placed. And so it was that the other day I looked up to see this little bow still hanging in the kitchen. And it brought to mind the biblical passage we read today about the rainbow.

For those people living in biblical times, the rainbow was not just a beautiful phenomenon of nature, but was understood to be God's bow, God's weapon. The rainbow symbolized God's bow at rest. Hung up in the sky, the rainbow symbolized a state of peace between God and all creation.

This state of peace came about following the great Flood that wiped out all creation save for Noah and his family and the assembly of animals on the Ark. The Bible tells us that before the Flood, God was greatly grieved by the wickedness of humankind. Violence and evil and corruption filled the earth. And God was sorry to have made humankind. But the story tells us that Noah caught God's attention as a rare example of righteousness. And so God instructs Noah

to build and Ark to house him and his family and the animals. And when the Flood comes, they are all spared.

At the point of our scripture passage today, the flood waters have receded and Noah and his family and all the animals have left the Ark. And it is at this moment that God reaches two very important conclusions.

The first conclusion God arrives at is that humankind is hopeless. As Noah makes a burnt offering to God following the Flood, God takes this occasion to reflect upon the whole sad and soggy episode of the Flood. God says to Noah that “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” In other words, God realizes that the Flood has changed nothing about humanity. Human beings are still inclined toward what is wicked, sinful, and wrong. God’s acknowledgement about the state of humanity reveals an important biblical perspective about the reality of sin. Much of the time, we tend to understand sin as actions that are wrong or hurtful or immoral. But this passage reveals a biblical understanding that sin is not only *actions* but that sin is in fact part of the human *condition*. In our story today, God reaches the conclusion that sin lies within the very nature of humanity, within the inclinations of our hearts. And so, any hope we might have for ourselves or our communities will not come from us. Any hope we have will depend upon God.

And that leads to God’s second conclusion. After assessing that humanity is hopeless to improve themselves on their own, God decides that *notwithstanding* the sorry state of humanity, God will remain steadfast to this world. The Flood may not have affected any change in humanity but the Flood does indeed prompt a change in God. God hangs up the bow in the sky and enters into an entirely different kind of relationship with humanity and all of creation. God states, “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and

the earth . . . the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.” God extends a *covenant* to humanity and to all of creation. The word *covenant* is repeated over and over again—a total of 7 times in these few verses.

Let’s take a moment to reflect upon what is meant by a *covenant*. A covenant is different than a contract. A contract between two parties is based on the idea of reciprocity. In a contract between a landlord and a tenant, each side seeks to benefit in some way. The tenant gets to live or do business in a space, the landlord gets the income. A contract ensures that the tenant can’t destroy the property and that the landlord will respond when the toilet overflows. A contract is based on the idea of “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.” And when one party fails to keep their side of the agreement, the contract falls apart.

But a covenant is different. A covenant is not based on “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine,” but on the notion that “your back matters to me.” And that is because a covenant is rooted in a *relationship* rather than simply an agreement to secure some benefit. Covenantal relationships are part of our lives in both formal and informal ways. The covenant of marriage is often formalized in a ceremony and symbolized with the giving of rings. But think about all those covenantal relationships that are part of our lives that exist without such formalities. They exist in families where parents give time and energy and support to their children, where the family members must forgive one another on an almost daily basis, and stand by one another in hardships. Unspoken covenants are lived out when grown children care for their aging parents and when friends bear with one another’s imperfections.

The thing about covenants, however, is that they are costly. Covenants can be emotionally costly. Forgiving those who have hurt us is costly. Remaining steadfast those who

don't want our help, or who are hurting themselves, or who lash out against us is painful.

Covenants are costly.

God decides to form a covenant with humanity. But given the broken nature of humanity, it is clear this will be a costly commitment on God's part. Nevertheless, God decides to turn toward humanity in a covenant rooted in patience, mercy, and love. And God pledges "never again" to be provoked. The bow is hung up in the sky for all to see this declaration of peace.

At the root of this covenant is the concept of grace—unmerited grace. God promises to turn toward us with steadfast love and commitment even when we turn away from God. We are indeed injured when we walk away from the covenant, but the injury will not be coming from a wrathful, angry God. The injury we sustain when we walk away from the covenant is generated from ourselves. God will grieve our failures. But God will not turn from us.

There are a lot of people walking around this world burdened with the belief that God could not love them, or forgive them, or care for them. Maybe you are one of those people. Maybe you are burdened by something in your past or present that makes you believe God has turned on you with anger, or that God is punishing you, or that God has rejected you, or that God has abandoned you.

We unfortunately hear that kind of message from some sectors of the Christian community. Such voices tell us that certain tragedies in the world or in our lives are a sign of God's wrath for human sin or are evidence of God's punishment. But such erroneous interpretations have failed to understand the biblical message of grace that is rooted in the covenant—a covenant that is expressed in our story today and the covenant that is reaffirmed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. God will never turn on you, abandon you, or punish you with

suffering. Evil and hardship and suffering do indeed exist, but they are not the result of God's anger or rejection. No matter how many times we may fail, God is the keeper of the covenant.

The bow in the sky is at rest.