

Looking for Rainbows Genesis 9:8-15

The story of Noah and the flood is a magical story that even children know quite well. For me the flood itself is the prelude to the really important part of the story – when the waters begin to recede.

That's the time in the story when God comes to Noah and his sons and makes a promise to them: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you...Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And God continued, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making ...: I have set my rainbow in the clouds.... Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you."

This is an important lesson that is a reminder of God's covenant and God's love. It tells us that no matter how disappointed God may become with humanity, never again will the story of the great flood be repeated.

God has made a covenant with us. That's the first thing we need to focus on this morning. If we could remind ourselves of that truth every time we see a rainbow, it will help us deal with every aspect of our life. God has made a covenant with us. The rainbow is but one symbol of that covenant. The cross is an even more important symbol of it.

On this first Sunday of Lent, we prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection. Truly what happened in those three days in Jerusalem more than 2,000 years ago dwarfs even the rainbow that Noah saw in the sky. And yet, they are part and parcel of the same story of God's love for fallen humanity.

Both declare this mighty truth: God is not interested in punishing humanity for its sin; **God is interested in saving humanity from sin.** You and I need to hold on to that promise, spelled out for us in John 3:17: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

That has been God's intent since the beginning of time. That's what a rainbow in the sky means. God has made a covenant with humanity.

That's particularly good to know when the storm clouds are rising and you think there might be a flood.

The past year has been devastating for many families—and I'm not just thinking of those who have been affected by actual floods, or droughts and wildfires like those that hit California, or the deep freeze that hit Texas this past week or tornados.

I'm talking about the flood of the effects of the COVID virus: days, weeks, months of isolation, job losses, nursing home deaths, school closings and virtual learning. Studies show that children have been affected more than any other segment of our population. It's been a slow recovery for most. It's been outright depression for families with kids.

But even when economic times are good, there are other calamities that come like the flood: loneliness, sickness, death, divorce. Sooner or later the flood waters begin to rise for all of us. Some of us make it through life with relatively few storm clouds, but no one escapes altogether.

There's a Jewish legend called the "Sorrow Tree" that says that on the Day of Judgment everyone will be allowed to hang all their unhappiness on a branch of a great tree. Then each person will walk around the tree and look at all the troubles hanging in the branches. Anyone

may choose someone else's unhappiness as their own, but no one ever does. Everyone reclaims their own troubles over the troubles of others.

The point is that all of us experience the flood waters of adversity. If you haven't yet you will. Because while being a Christian will help prepare your heart, your soul, and your mind for the flood, the flood waters will still rise.

Too often in the church we paint a picture of Jesus, and life with Jesus, as always happy, always positive, always profitable. When we do this, we paint a half truth. The positive outcome of Easter Sunday is only possible because Christ hung on the cross and suffered.

We need to be honest about it lest anyone misunderstand. Sometimes the best people we know have suffered horribly. Singing in the choir, teaching Discipleship classes, serving on the Session doesn't grant you exemption from pain. And the vexing part is that we don't know why.

But we do know that rainbow and the cross are signs that **God will not forsake us when suffering comes our way.**

Wayne Oates was a psychologist and religious educator who coined the phrase 'workaholic.' Oates wrote over fifty-seven books, most of them dealing with pastoral psychology.

In his autobiography, Oates described his growing up years. He was born to a poor family in Greenville, SC in 1917, Abandoned by his father while an infant, Oates was raised by his grandmother and sister while his mother work in the cotton mill. For this she earned \$30 a week. To survive they ate pinto beans, turnip greens, cornbread and molasses.

In his early school years, Oates discovered he had the ability to excel academically. And if he was ever going to get out of the mill town, out of poverty, that might be his way. "The trouble was, at age 14 everybody had to go to work in the mill and that meant you never graduated from high school. "

He was tempted to quit studying, but his grandmother told him to keep trying and to view life as if it was a funnel. If you started at the small end of the funnel, the difficult end, and worked through the tough times, eventually life would broaden out and be easy. But if you started at the broad end, the easy end, when things got tough, life became more narrow all the time."

That vision, shared with him by his grandmother, sustained by the covenant they shared together, and consummated by hard work and diligent preparation, eventually allowed him to end up at the broad end of the funnel, rather than at the narrow end.

He was also sustained by God's promise that whatever came, he would never be alone.

That promise has sustained millions of people through the centuries. Christians do not look at life through rose-colored glasses. We know there will be storms. We know the flood waters will rise. We know that we will be tempted, and tossed, and experience turmoil.

But we also know what God has promised, that trials will never overwhelm us, and that in the storm we can see the sign of a rainbow assuring us that God is very present in the world and will not fail us.