

September 03, 2017

Lesson 1: The Rainbow

Scripture: Genesis 8:20-9:17

Context:

“I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth.” When we hear this phrase, how can we not smile and think about the marvelous rainbows that we have seen after a large storm. But the words themselves are just as beautiful: God reminding us of the power of covenants.

This lesson that starts with our fall series on covenant begins with the first covenant that God made with humans. Among Bible stories, the flood story is perhaps one of the most well-known narratives. Who has not seen the toy children’s ark with all the animals, two by two to be placed in the bathtub or to be played with in the nursery? Even my first room at the Hope Hull parsonage had a border with the animals after the flood with a rainbow that could be seen in the background. However, we know that there is more to the story than children’s toys and cute decorations. The focus of the story is not to be on the flood itself, but upon the change wrought in God that makes a new beginning for creation.¹ This is a story of redemption and of God’s character.

Flood narratives were a part of nearly ancient culture. Israel’s is unique in that God deals with a heavy, painful crisis with creation.² What to do with a creation that rebels and goes awry? In the case of the flood and the aftermath, we see that God changes God’s mind. As Noah builds an altar, God smells the offering and contemplates that the land is not to be destroyed because of humans and the evil deeds they may commit.

Thus, God makes the first covenant. With the covenant in place, God is committing to a new order in the world. It does not change the fact that bad things will still happen as we even see the floodwaters rise in Houston. There will be death and destruction, as well as evil in the world. But humans are to know that these calamities are not rooted in the anger or rejection of God.³ The sign of this covenant is the bow, which God promises to never flood the earth to destroy it. In the midst of it all, God has changed and life is radically changed for all creatures especially humans as Noah embodies a renewed humanity.⁴ A new start is given to all and God even gives humans a sign to remind them that God’s goodness is ongoing.

Application:

The older I’ve gotten, the more I appreciate this story for lots of reason. The first being that it reveals the intimate nature of God and the fact that God does understand

¹Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1982), 73.

² Ibid., 78.

³ Ibid.m 84.

⁴ Ibid, 88.

human feelings and emotions. In this text, God is very active: “smelling the pleasing scent of the offering,” “the Lord thought to himself,” “ I have placed a bow in the clouds,” “I will remember the covenant between me and you,” and countless times in the text that begin with “God said.” Our God is not absent from the human experience. In fact, this narrative shows that God too has emotions. I especially am grateful from this text because it is always a conversation piece when someone starts: “Well the world is going to hell in a hand basket. God is going to destroy us all over.” God will not do so as we read in this text. Even when humans mess up, our God is not in the business of destroying or “purging” people.

The other aspect of this text that is important is that of covenant. God wants to be in relationship with humanity. The rainbow is a reminder that God’s covenant is everlasting; God stays true to God’s promise. What an important thing for us to think about as we look outside in nature. Our God is always with us during both the storms physically and emotionally. I’ve heard it said by many that all they needed to do was look outside after a rainstorm to see the rainbow and to be gently reminded that God had never abandoned them.

But it raises another thing to us that will be a reiterating theme: covenant is important. When words are exchanged in which you make a vow, they are to be eternal and ongoing. A covenant isn’t a contract; it is something that you agree to even if there is a break. As I think of this story I am reminded of all the times that humans veer away from God. We do things like quarrel with one another, hurt one another, and take vows that we later recant when it doesn’t look good for what we want in life. Yet through it all God still keeps God’s promises to always love and not destroy us. As we think about the rainbow and God’s covenant, perhaps we would do well to think about how we order our own lives and ask if we see that rainbow as just a pretty wonder, or as a reminder that God will see us through all the storms in our personal lives, our communities, and our churches.

Respectfully,
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