

Rainbows for the Fallen World
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Flood
Genesis 9:8-17

A few years back my Uncle Peter and my Aunt Margaret who live in Guelph, Ontario became empty nesters. They celebrated by buying acreage just outside of town. It's a nice piece of property, and on the premises was a redbrick 1880's farmhouse. When they made the purchase, they weren't particularly interested in the house, it was the land they were after. But when people heard about the old house they said, "O Cool! An old house! How great! You should restore it! You should renovate it! Make it one of those charming country houses! Fill it with antiques." Everyone wanted them to be Chip and Joanna Gaines. They were not Chip and Joanna Gaines, they were Peter and Margaret, and so they took a more realistic approach. They hired an inspector. The inspector looked at everything. He took an honest look at the size and layout of the rooms. He took an honest look at the state of the plumbing and the electrical. The inspector made his report and my uncle and aunt realized that it simply wasn't economically viable for them to redo this house. The costs were too high. It wasn't practical. And so Peter and Margaret decided to tear it down. And if you were in their situation, with the money they had to work with, you would have done the same thing.

In Genesis 6-8 the Lord God, the creator of heaven and earth faced the same decision with his acreage. The human being he had put at the center of the whole creation had become wicked and corrupt. The inclinations of the human heart were evil. The house of humanity's soul was derelict and ruined. And so in the remarkable words of 6:6 (NRSV), "*The Lord was grieved that he had made people on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.*" God decides there is only one thing to do: With his heart full of pain (verse 6) he decides to take the whole business down and start again. And that's what he does. The flood is God taking the old creation down to its foundation, and starting again with Noah. But after the flood is over, after the landing on Ararat, after the dove and the raven have flown off, God's heart is filled again, this time with a very different emotion. "*The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma [of Noah's sacrifice] and said in his heart, 'Never Again! Never again will I curse the ground because of humans,'*" even though their hearts are still evil (8:21). Now it's compassion that fills God's heart and he makes a commitment, he makes a promise, he makes a covenant never to take the road of destruction. No more floods. No more knocking the whole business down and starting from scratch. From this point forward God commits himself to be a God of restoration. He chooses the renovation business instead of the wrecking business. The people he made are still broken, their hearts are still evil, but he is committed to making them new.

Here's the amazing thing, God makes this commitment even though this renovation project makes no economic sense. If he thought like normal people do, like my uncle and aunt did in Guelph, if he thought like any of us facing something that broken and that decrepit, he would have said, forget it. The damage is too severe and the costs are too high! But against the advice of his accountant, despite the costs, out of his compassionate heart, God chooses restoration. He's going to fix this no matter how much it costs. From now on when he sees humanity torn up with sin and wickedness, instead of sending a flood, he will send a prophet or

an angel or a leader or a judge or maybe even a one and only Son. This story gives us a rare glimpse into the heart of God, and we see that at the center of his heart is pain, that ultimately turns into compassion and commitment. And he gives us a sign of the compassion and commitment in his heart: the rainbow, the sign of the covenant. The rainbow shines from the heart of a compassionate God. And it is good news for all of us who know how badly we're broken, and how much restoration work we really need.

Throne

Ezekiel 1:22-28, Revelation 4:1-6

When I think of rainbows as a sign of God's faithfulness, I think of my wedding day. Linda and I were married in the morning. Our reception lasted to about 4PM, and by 6 PM we were in Linda's 1984 Toyota Tercel headed to our honeymoon in New Hampshire. As we drove down I-90 headed east, we drove toward a thunderstorm. Ahead of us and above us was a dark cloud, but behind us the sun was setting, and the combination of the two created up a brilliant rainbow, a double rainbow, which really stood out against the dark sky. This was more than an aesthetic experience for us. In the context of our wedding day, in the context of this day where in some ways our whole life was summed up and our whole future lay before us, this wasn't just an experience of something pretty. It was a sign of God's faithfulness. It was a covenant sign. It was God's wedding day sermon to us. Ever since then, when I see a rainbow, I think of that day and I think of God's faithfulness.

Of course, I shouldn't have needed my wedding to have these associations, as we just heard in Genesis 9, rainbows are supposed to make all of us think of God's faithfulness and the compassion in God's heart. All of us should remember the covenant when we see those 7 colors. And that's true not only when we see rainbows in the sky after a Michigan thunderstorm; that's true when you see them in the Bible. Rainbows don't appear in the Bible that often. In fact tonight we read 3 of the 4 passages where the word appears. But even though they're infrequent, every time they show up they are significant. In both Revelation 4 and Ezekiel one, the rainbow shows up as part of a vision of God on his throne. Both John and Ezekiel see God seated on his divine throne and in each case when they see God enthroned in heaven, they see him surrounded by a rainbow. This is not simply a divine light show. This is not God doing fancy fireworks. This rainbow in Ezekiel and revelation is a sign. It's a sign of the covenant. It's a sign that God's faithfulness is so much a part of him, that his commitment to us is so important to him, that it's right there with him, surrounding him in his court room. The rainbow promise isn't something that God keeps in the attic of the heavenly temple, or in some file cabinet in a storage room. It's right there, in front of him, encircling him. He's that committed to us.

In both the context of Ezekiel and the context of Revelation, a reminder of faithfulness was what the people needed. Because both visions are given at a time when God's people face trouble. Both rainbow visions appear when the people are in the middle of a storm. In Ezekiel the trouble is of Israel's own making. Ezekiel prophesied in a time of unfaithfulness. The people had abandoned God. They were worshipping idols, they were disregarding the Lord's commands. It was as bad as the time of Noah or even worse. And it is clear that God is angry with them. The first 35 chapters of Ezekiel prophesy judgment for the sinful people. It's just about 35 chapters of nothing but bad news. God is steaming mad. But the rainbow at the beginning, the rainbow around the throne is a little hint that while he is angry, his anger is the anger of a loving Father frustrated with a child who is breaking his heart. His anger doesn't negate the promise. Israel's

sin isn't enough to make God give up on her. And indeed at the end of the book you hear how God will restore Israel. In Revelation the people also face trouble, but this time the trouble is not their fault. This time they are victims of persecution. The Roman Empire is threatening the church, and the persecution is bad enough that people wonder if the church will survive. In John's vision the thunder and lightning of the vision remind people that God is strong; stronger than Rome. But the rainbow that encircled the throne reminded them that God is compassionate; he had not forgotten them. He would keep his promises. When we face troubles in life, whether those troubles are because of our sins or because of circumstances beyond our control, it's good to know about that rainbow that surrounds the heavenly throne. Our troubles are real, but they are no match for the power of the rainbow.

Light

John 8:12, Ephesians 5:8-13

One thing about rainbows, they aren't very common. You see a really good rainbow a handful of times in your life. I haven't seen a really good one this year. I've seen bits and pieces of one, but not a nice big full bow spanning the sky. Those are few and far between. When you see one of those and you start fumbling for your camera because you want to remember. I was thinking about the rainbow as a sign of God's covenant faithfulness, it struck me that the rarity of rainbows fits our experience of God's presence in the world. As Christians, those moments in our life where we have a direct intense and clear experience of God's faithfulness are also relatively rare. For most of us, there are only a handful of times where God's goodness and grace burst upon us with the clarity and color and intensity of a rainbow. We never forget those days, those moments. On most days God's presence is harder to discern. When you see a rainbow, it hits you right between the eyes. You can't miss it. But on most days God isn't like that. Most of us have to be on the lookout for God's presence in an ordinary day, we have to work at discerning God, and we have to practice the presence of God. And that can be frustrating. There are days when we say, Lord send me a rainbow! In need a big, bright double rainbow for my storm! Send me some bright, unmistakable sign of your presence. Who doesn't want that?

But as I thought about it this week, I think there is a sense in which the rainbow of God's presence is there all the time. Every day there are rainbows for us. Think about it: what is a rainbow? It is refracted light. Light passes through water droplets, and it is refracted into red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. *So, all the colors of the rainbow, all the glory of the rainbow are present in ordinary light.* The light that fills this sanctuary right now, the light that's falling on your faces right now, there are rainbows in that light. You don't see them, but they are there. So it is with God. God's presence is always there. Every day He fills our lives and shines on our faces. Morning by morning new mercies we see. His presence is as regular as the sun coming up. Often we don't realize he's there until those special rainbow moments, those mountaintop experiences. But just because the mountaintop experience might end and the rainbow might disappear, that doesn't mean God's presence is gone. The rainbow of God's presence is there all the time, shining on our faces, lighting up our path. It's just unrefracted.

Thinking about how God's faithfulness is like a rainbow contained in the everyday light leaves me with two sort of practical thoughts. The first is sort of obvious. I need to remind myself that just because I can't see the rainbow doesn't mean it's not there. God is faithful with me in all sorts of tiny regular way every day. The faithfulness of the covenant is working in my life every day in a million ways and I shouldn't be too quick to moan about God's absence. The

second is less obvious. I think there are ways to make the white light of God the ordinary presence of God, refract into rainbows. I think there are ways to make God's covenant faithfulness present not just as white light, but as the full range of color. In the physical world we can do that. In the physical world we can use a prism to bring out the rainbow. A prism refracts normal everyday light into the full spectrum of color. In the world of faith there is also a way of refracting God's light, there is a sort of spiritual prism, and that's us. We are the prisms of God's faithfulness. We are the children of the light. When we become agents of faithfulness and compassion and love to other people and when we do it in the name of the Jesus, when we do it in the name of the one who has the rainbow around his throne, then we can make rainbows of faithfulness and hope appear for others. People of God, as surely as the sun will come up tomorrow, the light of God is shining here in this place. May we walk as children of the light and wherever we go may we be prisms, refracting rainbows to a fallen world.

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