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Rainbows – Genesis 9:8-17

This may come as a shock, but not every Scripture fits every circumstance. The passage that was published, erroneously, in the Valley Voice this month is a good example: the story of Noah's drunken binge doesn't have much to do with our theme today!

But although this text is the one I chose, it has not been easy to work with.

Sermons are like children, sometimes. One moment they pull at you, trying to get you to do something, go somewhere with them. Other times, they just run away and do the best they can to hide from you. And still other times, they tease you, push-and-pull you, luring you down an emotional alley and then blocking any escape.

In the end, though, the task of preaching still remains: to speak a word of truth, to help others find inspiration in the Word, to teach, to comfort, to trouble and tend. By the grace of God, point to something of God so that others can find something for themselves to spread around.

This week has been one of those weeks when all these things have come into play. Struggling with a text – Genesis 9 – that keeps just out of reach, all the time dribbling sparkly bits to keep me following; struggling with the need to craft a message that will help you realize how important your contributions are to making our life as a church, as we know it, possible; and then, after the Beirut bombings, the Baghdad bombing, and now what was done in Paris, the city of light, struggling to speak a word of comfort. All that in eighteen minutes – well, now thirteen. Help me, Lord.

The rainbow, God's promise. That's our subject: it's a perpetual promise, but one that is so gossamer, ephemeral (and I choose those words because they are so fragile-sounding). A rainbow looks like you could reach out and touch it, but as anyone who's chased the end of one knows, all it is made of are mist and light, two of the things we use to create illusion and impermanent images – along with shadow.

God's promise made of light is shadowed by evil, as we know all too well. If you shadow a rainbow, separate it from the light, it disappears.

The flood was supposed to wash away evil, yet even Friday there was slaughter, there was a massacre, in the name of religion no less. At the end of a bloody week in the world.

The thing that ties the flood, the rainbow, evil, God, and us all together is water. The flood was water. The flood led God to repurpose rain, the instrument of the flood. The rain made the mist that is light's canvas in the rainbow, the promise that God would never again wash the earth clean by means of water, despite the presence of evil. The drops of water in baptism, that washes us clean from sin but does not close the door on our willful sinfulness – water itself which is necessary to sustain life, but can take life and does not prevent the misuse of life.

And then there's our goal this morning: to encourage your generosity, one of God's great gifts to each of us. To tell you how all this works together for good. To tell you that God's promise still is true, is still ours, despite the evil and pain around us.

God made the first covenant, the first promise to humanity here at the conclusion of the flood. "Never again! I am not going to do this again!" The sign of this promise is particularly spectacular here in the desert: the rainbow, God's "bow in the sky." What a powerful sign it is!

A friend of mine told me that after her husband died at the end of a long and painful illness, she drove backroads along the great mountains around Mt. Rainer. An amazing drive at any time; but here, in her grief, she found something unique, a simple, special blessing from God. Every time she turned a corner, she encountered a rainbow, rainbow

after rainbow. She said that the message she felt from God was clear: “I am with you, always.”

I have to add to that. To me, it’s as if God was speaking to her grief, saying that no matter how dark, how tragic, how painful things get, it will never just end, the painful will be remade, reborn, renewed.

We know the evil around us, at least enough of it to trouble us; but we don’t always see the good, not least because it seems inconsequential to us, like a rainbow, which is, again, just light passing through droplets in the air.

Every corner my friend turned as she drove through the mountains, another reminder of God’s promise was waiting. For us, too: every time you look at this building, every time you hear the music, every time you discover something new or remember something old about God’s love, God’s goodness, the power of God’s salvation and transformation of each of us through the power of Christ, every time someone visits you in the name of Christ, as a part of this fellowship, every time your heart is warmed by the assurance of another child warmed, another family fed, another person reached on the other side of the world or here in Green Valley as a result of your simple return of something that God gave you in the first place, every one of those is another reminder of God’s promise.

Every one of us is a sign of God's promise. Every one is a rainbow, for those who have eyes to see.

Jesus tells a parable in Luke 18 about a judge, who, though he doesn't care about a widow's cry for justice, gives it to her anyway to shut her up 'cause she's bugging him. The parable, Jesus says, is about not losing heart - praying, despite what seems to be silence on the other end; giving because we know it's what we know we ought to do though it's hard and we don't always see the benefit; and also about our not seeing all the ways that giving is transforming our world or our lives, or feeling that our gift is not enough to make a difference.

It does make a difference. Just as all those raindrops came together to make the flood, just as the few drops of water bring us to new life in baptism, your prayers, your gifts make a difference, every day, in many ways you may never see, never know.

Every time you see a rainbow hanging in the sky, you can remember the promise of God, and when you've learned how to truly see, you can also see the promise of God in every corner of this place, of this people - in every person you meet, in places you might never expect.

Here, among the people of this church, gathered in this place and spread all over the world, words spoken and deeds done and offered in Christ's name happen as God's light is refracted through the raindrops of your giving, and this hurting world is nurtured, if only in small ways.

Remember, the problems of this world are huge, and against that backdrop, we can only do so much!

And yet. A woman walked along an ocean beach, picking up starfish and tossing them back into the ocean. Another walker, coming from the other direction, stopped her and said, “Why are you doing that? What difference can it possibly make?”

The woman reached down, picked up another starfish and tossed it back into the water. “Made a difference to that one,” she said.

Those deeds we do, the gifts we offer that exercise our generosity, are the very stuff of rainbows, little drops coming together. The light of Christ becomes the sign of God’s promise as it shines through them, as it makes use of what we return to God, light on the water we offer in our giving. We make rainbows, little signs of God’s promise, in our lives and through this church and our giving.

Fighting against the darkness – that’s what we do here, even if it seems like we’re holding a candle against an ocean of dark. Will you help us?