

The Rainbow and the Cross
Genesis 9:8-17 (I Peter 3:18-22)
The Source
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A man walks into a bar in Dublin (so the story goes) and orders three glasses of beer; he then proceeds to sit by himself and drink a sip from each glass in turn. When he finishes he orders three more.

The bartender says, "You know, a pint of Guinness goes flat minutes after I pour it; it tastes better if you just order them one at a time. The man replies, "Well, you see, I have two brothers – one in America and one in Australia. When we all left home we made a pact to drink this way to remember the days when we were all together." The bartender acknowledges the custom and pours three more glasses. The man becomes a regular, drinking three glasses of beer in turns.

One day the man comes in and orders just two glasses. All the other regulars notice this and fall silent; they assume one of the brothers has passed. On the second round, as the barkeep is filling just two glasses, he offers, "I am very sorry for your loss, and I want to offer my condolences." The man looks quizzically at the bartender for a moment, and then a light dawns and he laughs out loud. "Oh, no," he smiles, "everyone is just fine. I've just can't get them to quit drinking for Lent."

I tell this story not because I want you to give up something for Lent. I tell it because we all hold something dear that represents or symbolizes something else, whether it is a ritual or an object. For this man, the ritual of drinking 3 glasses of beer at the same time represents the brotherhood he has with his 2 brothers.

When I had my little church in New Jersey, one of the church members invited the church over for a Christmas Party. I noticed she collected shot glasses. I asked her about them. She began to point to various shot glasses and told me where they came from. Each of them had a story of something that happened on their vacation. Those shot glasses don't mean a thing to someone outside her family, but they meant a lot to her.

Today we are going to talk about 2 symbols that are important to Christianity – the rainbow (also important to Judaism) and the cross. Without understanding the story and meaning behind them, they become meaningless. We are going to look at the story of the rainbow which will connect us to the cross.

In a few moments, I am going to ask Marie to come up and read the story about the rainbow. What I want you to notice is a word that is repeated over and over again. This word connects the rainbow and the cross.

The passage is about Noah, and begins after the flood has subsided, and the animals and Noah can leave the boat. Before we read the passage, we need to understand why the flood happened in the first place. When this story is told, there usually are two versions told in a church, depending on the audience: a G-rated version which is suitable for all audiences, and there is an adult R-rated version which contains graphic images of violence.

The G version looks like this (show PPT picture) –

And here is what the G version sounds like: I need some adult volunteers – 6 to be exact. Hand a sheet of construction paper to each adult. Each piece of paper is a color in the rainbow: Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Hand them out in mixed up order.

Tell the adults to arrange themselves in order of the colors of the rainbow. After the attempt, let them know that there is a secret to remembering the order — the name of a make-believe person named “Roy G. Biv.” Explain that the letters of his name stand for red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet.

The rainbow appeared in the sky after there was a big flood on earth. God put the rainbow there as a promise that God loves us and wants us to continue living on earth and enjoying it.

Have adults sit back down.

This is the cover up version of the flood. For you see in the real version, the story is rated R. Because there are corpses (show ppt picture). The Bible says, “And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures...and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life, died. [God] blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground” (Genesis 7:22-23).

It says in the passage that God did it. Why did God do this? Read with me Genesis 6:5 (on PPT)“The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” This is an amazing statement. This wasn’t what God created humans for – to be in a relationship with Him. Their thoughts weren’t even turning towards God.

Then it says in verse 6: “and it grieved [God] to his heart.” Note that God sends the flood not out of anger or wrath, but out of grief. God is pained by the brokenness of creation. God sends the flood not as an act of revenge, but out of grief over the rending of human relationship with God.

With this in mind, Marie, will you read Genesis 9:8-17. And note the word that is repeated over and over again

Read Genesis 9:8-17 (PPT)

What is the word? Covenant. It is repeated 7 times in this paragraph. When something is mentioned over and over again in scripture, it's saying, "Listen up!" Obviously, covenant is important in this story, and therefore, we need to understand it.

A covenant is an agreement between two parties, usually human parties, whether individuals, or between several businesses, or several nations. The main section of a covenant usually stipulates a certain behavior on either side to make the agreement binding.

In the Bible, covenant is unique in that covenant is often between God and human beings. And there are usually stipulations in these covenants. God made a covenant with Abraham – if you leave your land, I will bless you with descendants and land. It's an "if...then" covenant. If you do this, then I will do this. With Israel, God promises to bless them as a nation if they obey His commandments. In other words, the covenant or agreements are conditional.

The covenant here in Genesis is very different. It is not conditional. There are no "ifs," no duties required. God says never again will I send a flood, but it is not joined by "unless..." God makes a promise to never destroy the earth again by water or a flood. No matter what. No matter how bad it gets. We don't have to do anything. We don't have to live up to any part of the bargain. God just promises he will never do this again. Period.

This is an unconditional covenant, an extravagant covenant, a gift to the world. It is an eternal covenant – in other words, it will last forever. And not only is it unconditional and eternal, it is gracious in that Noah didn't have to beg God for this covenant. God initiated it.

Thus, this covenant is unique because it is unconditional and it is God initiated.

There is something else that makes this covenant very unique. The covenant includes not just humans, but "every living creature..the birds, the domestics animals, and every animal on the earth..." (verse 10). This is a universal covenant. It includes everything that lives on earth.

Thus, this covenant is initiated by God, unconditional and universal. And to show that God means business, God gives a sign that covers over everything: he sets a bow in the sky as a sign of his promise. But what is interesting is that the bow is not for us.

The bow is for God. God put the rainbow in the sky so that God would remember His covenant promise not to destroy us. It is not mentioned once, but twice. You could say it is like the string around God's finger! You and I can look at the rainbow if we wish, but according to this story it really is not for us, but for God.

So what does the rainbow have to do with the cross? Take a look at the 3 unique aspects of God's covenant with Noah: unconditional, God initiated, universal.

The cross is God initiated. God *sent* His son not because of anything we did, but because of God's love for the whole world.

The cross is unconditional. God sent His son not because of anything we did, but because of *God's love* for the whole world.

The cross is universal. God sent His son not because of anything we did, but because of God's love for the *whole world*. All of creation.

God continues to seek covenant with us, to be in relationship with us. Not because of anything we did, do, or will do, but because God so loved the world. This is good news.

I Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God."

That's what it is always about – bringing us back to God. The flood was to bring people back to God, So, next time you see the rainbow, remember it was to bring people back to God. The next time you see the rainbow, remember the cross. The cross brings us back to God.

So here is your take-home: I have DirectTV with a DVR. Every once and a while, the DRV goes kind of funky on me. It just doesn't do what I ask it to do. My DVR and I have a broken relationship. In order to fix it, I have to hit the "Reset" button. When God sent the flood, God hit the "Reset" button. When God sent Christ, God hit the "Reset" button.

From time to time, we need to hit the "reset" button. This is what Lent is all about. In this season of Lent, as we walk with Jesus to the cross, as we remember that God calls brings us back through the cross, take the time to evaluate your relationship with God through prayer and devotion and worship and confession. Take time to hit the "reset" button to bring you back to God.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. The covenant with Noah is universal. It included people and every living thing on earth. God cares about *all* his creation. Where does this aspect of the covenant with Noah speak most deeply to you: in your relationship with God, or in your valuing of the earth and its creatures?

2. In what ways does the unconditional nature of the Noah covenant reflect your spiritual journey and experiences?

3. The word for bow used in Genesis 9:8-17 has a double meaning. It can mean rainbow and it can mean a weapon of war as in a bow and arrow. God's bow (weapon of war) is resting in the clouds. What does this mean for you?

4. What signs do you carry that remind you of God's grace and trustworthiness?

5. Read this quote from Lewis Smedes (from "The Power of Promises," A Chorus of Witnesses, edited by Long and Plantinga, (Eerdmans, 1994) keeping in mind God's promise to never go back on his covenant:

"Somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God."

What promises do you need to keep?

Prayer of Adoration

To you, O Lord, we lift up our souls.

To you, who alone is truly good.

To you, who alone is upright.

To you, O Lord, we lift up our souls.

And we wait on you, Lord. (pause)

We wait on you to lead us into your truth. (pause)

We wait on you to show us your path. (pause)

To the One who set his rainbow in the skies,

To you, be honor and power and glory forever.

Amen.