



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: March 1, 2009**

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#### **Signs of God's Covenantal Love: A Rainbow, Robert B. Culp**

Genesis 9: 8-17

I cannot remember when I saw a rainbow for the first time, whether I was alone or with others, and whether it was at home or far from my own back porch. But while I do not recall the time or place of seeing my first rainbow, I suspect that my initial impressions of seeing that perfect arch of purest color cast against the dolphin gray of a cloudy sky are pretty much the same I have today: surprise, fascination, awe and wonder. And though I know that such an unexpected sight is just a trick the sun plays – the refraction of light in drops of water – there is something about a rainbow that speaks of a sign, and a message, and a blessing.

My mother used to tell us about a very special rainbow story that she and my father experienced together in my father's first pastorate. When they were in Delaware, Ohio, my father was in his church study and my mother was at home taking care of their firstborn child, Harriett, who was approaching her first birthday. In addition to their birthday plans for Harriett, they were basking in the delightful news that mom was expecting another baby.

That day, in the church study and at home, each one of them was listening to the radio when they heard the news that World War II was over. Running into the street, with dad racing home and mom (with Harriett in her arms) scurrying down the front steps, they found the entire neighborhood outside, all of them cheering and crying and embracing one another. Suddenly, someone said, "Look!" and pointed down the street. As they all looked to where the oak trees parted, they saw the top of a brilliant rainbow. Mom said that all at once the street got as quiet as a prayer. "It was God's promise of peace," she said, "and we all knew it."

Without any question, the story of God and Noah and the rainbow is one of the stories that has penetrated down deep inside of us, so deep that most of us make the connection my mother articulated without even thinking about it. The rainbow is God's promise of peace. It is a sign of God's everlasting and unconditional covenant with all creation. And it is hard for those of us in the faith to see one without experiencing some measure of that peace.

The rainbow is God's pure gift to us, and it serves as a colorful corrective for those who believe that all the grace in the Bible is to be found only in the pages of the New Testament. It is not. Indeed, the sacred story is full of grace from the very beginning, although it seems that we human beings have always had a perverse way of resisting it or fighting it off. Sometimes, it is as if we cannot stand too much good news.

Think of Adam and Eve, and the forbidden fruit of Eden. Or think of Cain and Abel, and the first murder among human beings, but certainly not the last. Over the course of the initial handful of chapters in Genesis,

God moves from seeing everything he made and declaring it all “very good,” to saying “I am sorry that I have even made them at all.”

Only Noah, his family, and that floating zoo survived. And it was awful, make no mistake about it. But the cleansing God wanted was complete. The destruction was total, and when the waters subsided it was like

Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Andrew and an awesome tsunami had all circled the entire globe. God had willed it, but the result was so devastating that God willed never to will such a thing again. God said to Noah, “I establish my covenant with you ... never again.” As a sign of this covenant, God set a rainbow in the clouds, as Barbara Brown Taylor notes “Not to jog Noah’s memory, but to jog God’s own.”

In the light of all this, we could well ask, what in the world happened? At the beginning of the story, God was mad enough to drown the whole earth. But here at the end, something major has shifted in the divine mind. Humankind, God knows, will not change. In no time at all, Jacob will be stealing Esau’s birthright, Aaron will be dancing around the Golden Calf, David will be figuring out how to get Bathsheba’s husband killed in battle, and Judas and Peter and Thomas will be busy in their own acts of betraying, denying, and doubting Jesus himself.

So, the story of the flood is not a story about a change in humankind. It’s a story about a change in God. From now on, God will not let his sorrow or anger lead him to kill. From now on, God will not repay betrayal with betrayal. From now on, God will not use retribution as a way of dealing with his precious creation. Instead, God will bind himself to his creation in peace, promising to be involved personally in its growth and development, although he knows how it will wound him and how dearly it will cost him. So it is that God will allow himself to be wounded. So be it. It is the cost of God’s amazing love.

With this first remarkable covenant, God chooses to ally himself with his cantankerous creation, whatever the cost. If there is pain and sorrow in the world, if there is darkness and suffering and exhausting struggle, then God will share it. Never again will God protect himself from worldly ills and darkness by killing off those who have caused such pain. God’s promise to them is life, not death – “an everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” It’s as if God declares in the rainbow: “From now on, I am in the protection business, not the destruction business. From this day forth, you are all my partners, and your lives are as precious to me as my very own.”

In many respects, the story of our faith is the history of God’s promises to humankind. When we tell the sacred story, we organize our telling around such promises as these:

- \* the promise of peace to Noah;
- \* the promise of the land and nation to Abraham and Sarah;
- \* the promise of the Law to Moses;
- \* the promise of a son to Mary;
- \* the promise of new life and God’s abiding presence to those who gather in Jesus’ name.

Interestingly, they are all the same promise at heart: namely, the promise of having an intimate relationship with God, of our belonging to God, and God’s belonging to us ... and the promise of living in a joy so deep, and a hope so rich, that it can bring tears to our eyes.

It’s a promise we all need to remember, especially amidst the challenges of days such as these. For just as God may need the rainbow, so too do we need a rainbow – as a reminder of such a covenant of love between God and all creation, between you and me, and every creature who shares the breath of life with us.

So, in these beginning days of Lent, may we stay awake to such signs as a colorful rainbow ... and a plain cross ... and a simple table of grace such as is set for us today, in order that we stay awake to God, and to one another. And the next time we look up into the sky and see a rainbow – that perfect curve of colors stretching across the sky – may we remember God’s everlasting “Yes” to all who live in its embrace.