



HANGING UP THE BOW

A Sermon on Genesis 9:8-17 & Mark 14:22-25—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
February 18, 2018—The First United Church of Christ (Cong.), Milford, CT

Genesis 9:8-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Mark 14:22-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

While they were eating, he [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take: this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

I planned to preach a sermon on covenant this morning, using the lectionary reading of God’s covenant with Noah as well as Mark’s

remembrance of the Last Supper to proclaim the ways in which trusting in God is both the easiest and most consistently difficult act of faith. It was going to be clever, with jokes at the beginning and a twist in the middle that would have helped us consider God’s love through Jesus.

But then on Wednesday, 17 people were shot and killed and many others injured in Parkland, Florida. And so I am still preaching on the same readings, but with a different set of circumstances to address.

1.

The arc of the Bible can be traced as one long story of God figuring out how to relate with fallen humanity, and whether God will use coercion and violence or not.

In the beginning, Genesis 1 describes God saying, “Let there be light,” and there was light, and God declares it good. This story is remarkable because all the other creation stories that came from religions before Judaism tended to describe a violent beginning to creation: gods fighting against each other, waters drowning people, divine blood spilled out of which peoples emerged, that kind of thing. But Judaism says out of the primordial stuff, God peacefully creates order and life.

Later in Genesis¹, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham for some reason is going to go through with it, until at the last possible moment God stops Abraham and has him sacrifice a ram instead. Some people think it’s a story that helped move Judaism away from human sacrifice. Then in Exodus, God seeks to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and only after showing divine power to Pharaoh and Egypt on nine different previous occasions—plagues—does God lastly resort to the shadow of death killing firstborn Egyptians in order to convince Pharaoh to let God’s people go. God drowns the Egyptian

armies but it's a form of self-defense perhaps to save the Israelites from them. Still, violence to defend the Israelites.

The rest of the Old Testament include references where God condones or perhaps oversees violent acts; and other places where God is seen as merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

And then in the New Testament, there is Jesus, whose death has both been interpreted as a selfless, peaceful act or as the moment that God takes anger out on Jesus that was supposed to be directed at all of humanity.

God has a complicated relationship with violence in the Bible.

2.

But today's Old Testament reading makes one of the single strongest biblical declarations for God's hope of peace.

God has just caused a flood to apparently swallow up most of creation, including almost all creatures and humans. Noah, his family, and the animals that are put on the ark are the only exceptions. After 40 days in the boat, Noah sends out the dove that returns with an olive branch, indicating that there's dry land somewhere. Noah, his family, and the animals disembark, at which point God pulls Noah aside and says, in effect, 'I'm setting up a new agreement, a covenant, with you, and everybody to come after you, as well as with all living things: I'm never doing this again. Never again a flood to lay waste to the earth.

'To sign this covenant, I will give you a sign—I am setting my bow in the clouds, as a reminder when rain has come that I can't ever do this or let this happen again. I shall see the rainbow and remember the everlasting covenant I established with all living creatures.'

To which we may say: that's a nice story. It makes for a dynamic Sunday school lesson. The rainbow is

such a marvelous symbol for kids to enjoy. Plus I'm grateful for Roy G. Biv; St. Patrick's Day stories of pots of gold; and the way that light refracts through raindrops to create the colors we see in the skies. But does the rainbow really sign a covenant between us and God? A covenant of peace? And what comfort does it bring me that God comes up with this only after almost wiping out all humankind?

First of all, if we have faith that God is in charge, if God created the world, made it all possible, then there is a logic to say that God, the one we absolutely, absolutely depend on, can choose to no longer sustain us. As Job is quoted after his land and his family are all taken from him, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord"ⁱⁱ.

But if God has the right to destroy creation only because God created creation and all creation absolutely depends on God's sustaining power, then that means that we do not have that right, no other human or any other creature has that right. And that is a foundational tenet of our faith and the faith of many other people that has enabled us to speak against and work against genocide, be it of Native Americans in our own history, of Jews in World War II, of Bosnian Muslims and Croats in 1990s Yugoslavia, of Kurdish Yazidis and Christians recently in parts of the Middle East, or Rohingyas from Myanmar (Burma) right now. And this tenet of faith enables us to speak out against mass violence closer to home, in Parkland, Virginia Tech, Vegas, and Newtown.

As the Hebrew Bible says several times, vengeance is God's, not ours.

But God's covenant with Noah declares that even the one being who does have that right, God, experiences the flood and changes course. Let's be clear: the first chapters of Genesis describe humans as messing up left and right: Adam and Eve get kicked out of the garden, then their son Cain kills

brother Abel, and once they start multiplying, it just gets worse. This is the context in which God almost starts creation over from scratch. But then after the flood, God reconsiders and makes a new covenant. As William Loyd Allen writes: “God places a restraining order against God’s self to defuse brutal retaliation upon unrestrained, violent creation.”ⁱⁱⁱ God enacted this because of the thorough wickedness of humankind then, but despite an impulse to wipe us out, reconsiders and “changes strategy,” like a parent who after struggling with an incorrigible child realizes that escalation won’t solve anything but instead will likely hurt the child much more than the parent, God decides that God can’t destroy life to save face or to save humanity.

The good news of today’s Genesis reading is that God will no longer participate in unending cycles of escalating violence. God hangs the bow of destruction in the clouds.

Now some people get disturbed that this story suggests God would change His mind. Isn’t God unchangeable? Immutable? The same yesterday, today, and forever? Well, perhaps, but perhaps we need to consider what part of God is unchangeable. As Allen notes, “The God revealed here is adaptable, touched to the heart by creation, and willing to accept hurt [to accept the hurt of human sinfulness] to keep hope alive. The God of this covenant is unchanging only in refusing to give up on creation. The God declaring this covenant is not an objective judge meting out a just sentence, but a lover grieved to the heart at the beloved’s violence, yet still seeking reconciliation.”^{iv}

3.

Today we still suffer from the wickedness of interpersonal violence and horror. We might not use the word wickedness much, maybe only in cases like the school shooting on Wednesday. But the more the world has changed, the more people probably have stayed the same.

Do you think God is upset that the covenant of the rainbow won’t make a difference if humankind destroys ourselves through nuclear war, the dissolution of civilized society, mass shootings, climate change, oceans rising for decades that will make a 40-day flood look like spit in the wind?

God is grieved by our violence, yet still seeks reconciliation.

Some people say that when Jesus died on the cross that God took God’s anger toward humankind out on Jesus: substitutionary atonement. Jesus took our place and suffered what we should have. I disagree. Maybe Jesus suffered what we should have, but it wasn’t God’s anger, it was human anger, violent anger, that put him on that cross. Violence—not with guns, not with tanks, not with abusive words—violence never makes things right, never redeems. In the case of Jesus, it is not his death that redeems us and makes us right with God, it is God’s love in Jesus Christ and God’s love on Easter morning that sets us right with God. As we heard in the anthem^v: “God so loved the world” that God turned the other cheek on the cross, and God so loves us and acts to save us even when we are ugly, wicked rascals, even when we stand complicit in systems of violence. But we need not stand complicit any longer.

4.

This church has had vigils for several of the mass shootings over the last few years. But this time I couldn’t do it. Not because I don’t care about the seventeen innocent people who died, but because I can’t be a part of the thoughts and prayers that don’t do something, too.

Two of the readings that are traditionally used on Ash Wednesday, the day the 17 people died, include Matthew 6, when Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...and whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand pray...at the street corners, so that they may be seen by

others. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father..."^{vi}

And in Isaiah 58, the prophet declares that we are often motivated to do good, to do things like fast, in order to leverage that goodness for social and political gain, "to quarrel...and to strike with a wicked fist. Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn..."^{vii}

I for one am taking this opportunity to change course. Today I am urging you to pray fervently in our own houses, around people you love, or around pictures of people you love, and to ask yourself if public displays of grief alone will change anything, if they will make life safer or more just for our loved ones and our neighbors near or far. We can choose the fast of seeking justice for our children and all children.

This is what tears me part inside: The youth taking turns rocking over there this morning have been

ⁱ Genesis 22.

ⁱⁱ Job 1:21, KJV.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wm. Loyd Allen, *Feasting on the World, Year B, vol. 2*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2008. p. 28.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v "God So Loved the World," from John Stainer's *Crucifixion*, based on John 3:16-17.

mostly sixth graders. Five years ago when the Newtown massacre took place they were first graders like most of the kids who died. What have we done for them in the last five years to make them safer? Pretty much nothing.^{viii}

We can, if we feel so called, urge our lawmakers to outlaw AR-15s and other semi-automatic weapons and to stand down with our nuclear arsenals and rhetoric that threatens life, to hang up our modern bows like God did. We can commit ourselves to diminish our carbon footprints and lessen the human impact on the environment so that we don't pick up the flood where God stopped all those years ago. We cannot make the world all roses and rainbows, but that doesn't mean we are destined to self-inflicted ruin.

I have faith that God will continue to love us and will not destroy us, and I hope that we may start to love humankind and creation so that we may not destroy ourselves or the creation that sustains us, by God's grace. God is grieved by our violence but continues to reach out to us with the love of the rainbow and Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray, Amen.

^{vi} Matthew 6:1, 5a, 6a, NRSV.

^{vii} Isaiah 58:3-8, NRSV.

^{viii} This was ad libbed. The kids were from our middle school youth group, who had been rocking in rocking chairs for 24 hours to raise funds for hygiene products for nursing home residents and supplies for an animal shelter.