



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 Feb. 18, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "Hope in the Wilderness"

Genesis 9:8-17 (NRSV)

9:8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

9:9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,

9:10 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.

9:11 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."

9:12 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:

9:13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

9:14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,

9:15 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.

9:16 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."

9:17 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."

"Hope in the Wilderness"

Some of you know that my father spent his career as a funeral director. One summer, long ago, we even lived in the upstairs apartment of a funeral home. I had just finished the first grade, so I don't remember much about that summer. One

memory stands out: the night that we lost our cat. At the time, we had a mischievous, misanthropic black cat named Abigale who was always running off, and one night, for the life of us, we looked everywhere and couldn't find her. Upstairs, downstairs, she was nowhere to be seen, until the next morning, when my father finally found her hiding in one of the caskets...which begs the question: do you get a discount, on a casket previously been used as a cat bed?

I told Renee in the office that story last week. When I said we found the cat in the casket, her eyes got really big, and I realized I had left out the detail that the casket was empty besides the cat. It was just in the showroom.

I have carried that story now for more than thirty years because, I think, it's a perfect example of dark humor, death and life, set beside one another – the black cat lost in the funeral home.

The same could be said of Noah's ark, maybe not the humor, but it's also a story of life and death, peril and promise – though, to be honest, often we skip the bleaker parts of the story.

In my daughter's preschool there's a mural starting at the entrance that leads all the way down the hall depicting the ark. It's a beautiful panorama. The animals recline by a stream, large, gray mountains towering off in the distance. You're first greeted by an elephant, who stands on a rock, and on the rock are stenciled the words, "Noah's Ark, Genesis 6-9." As you walk down the hall, you see kangaroos, zebras, monkeys, otters, giraffes. In the distance, behind the animals, is the ark, washed up on a rock, its side door open, more animals streaming out its side. Above the whole thing a brilliant rainbow.

But that's just part of the story, that's just Genesis 9; it's not 6-9. Its promise without peril.

I think also of the mosaic on the front of your bulletin. This artwork overlooks the fellowship hall of my last church. It's made of pieces of broken ceramic tile. The brilliance of the tiles really makes the colors of the rainbow pop.

But again, it's just half the story; we see life encircled by the rainbow; life encircled by God's promise, "When I see [the rainbow], I will remember my covenant...between me and you and every living creature of all flesh."

We tend not to dwell on the reason for the rainbow in the first place. When God destroyed all life save a few survivors in the ark. What if we told the whole story?

Beginning in Genesis, chapter 6: *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. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals...for I am sorry that I made them.*

Put that on a preschool wall, it will profoundly change the message of the mural:

Little Susie won't pick up her blocks

– “The Lord saw the wickedness of humankind.”

Put that in the fellowship hall:

A session meeting runs an hour late

– “The Lord was sorry he had made humankind on the earth.”

We focus on the rainbow. We don't talk about the reason for the rainbow in the first place. Because we don't want to wrestle with the image of a God, who flooded the earth and was sorry to have made humankind. No one wants to wrestle with that God, and I don't blame them.

And yet, that's exactly what the book of Genesis asks of us. Because the story of these chapters is a profound wresting with the character of God. It asks the hard questions of faith, like:

- What type of God do we worship?
- What is God's commitment to this creation?
- Does God abandon us or does God remember us in the flood?

And perhaps those questions seem distant. They seem distant, until they're not. For when the flood waters rise, in your life, or in our collective life together, sometimes you can't help but ask, Who is God after all? And what does God intend for me?

Notice throughout the story: God, not Noah, is the main character. God is the subject of all the action verbs¹:

¹ See Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1-25A* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 148.

Chapter 6:

“I will blot out from the earth”

“I am sorry that I have made them”

“I have determined to make an end of all flesh”

And the same is true for our verses today in chapter 9,

v. 9 “I am establishing my covenant”

v. 13 “I have set my bow in the clouds”

v. 16 “I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant”

The story begins with the God who abandons, and it ends with the God who remembers.

- And as a whole, the story seems to ask, which one is the true nature of God?
- Who is God really?
- Is God the one who abandons, or the one who remembers?

Do you ever wrestle with that question yourself?

In a world, where every month, is the hottest month on record. Last month was the Earth's warmest January since people started recording the temperature. Last summer was the hottest summer. When the records seem to be set anew each year, we have to ask, where is God, as the flood levels rise?

In a country, where Wednesday's shooting is no longer a surprise, because there's more guns than people, and division has become central to who we are. I mean, can you believe what the other side is doing? The other side of the aisle? The other side of the border? The other side, the other side, the other side. When the news of violence and war, greets you every time you turn on the news, it begs the question, are we alone in this wilderness?

You may be surprised, to learn we aren't the first believers to ask such questions.

Because these are the very same questions the final editors of the book of Genesis were wrestling with. Overwhelmingly, scholars believe the book of Genesis took its final shape during the Babylonian exile of the 6th Century BC.² At that time, the Empire of Babylon conquered Judea. Jerusalem was decimated, the temple torn down, the people dragged off to a land that was not their home.

² Ibid., 157.

As the Biblical writers put together the story of Noah and the flood, these ancestors in the faith were asking that question: Did God abandon us? Because everything around them seemed to say they were alone.

So, they started with a picture of God who floods the world, but they didn't end there. In wrestling with these profound and very real questions, they affirmed, even in the midst of exile, a God whose grace is more powerful than the flood, a God who remembers those crushed by the waters. A God who says, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature."

At the heart of this story is a community wrestling with its understanding of who God is in the midst of their wilderness. And, the good news is that at the end of that wrestling, their story ends with a rainbow, and a promise, and a God who remembers.

I find comfort in that, not just in the story's final promise, but also in the fact that the Biblical writers lived with these questions. They wrestled with these questions, so much that they didn't just leave us with a rainbow, but also the stories of the flood.

Do you feel that comfort too, in knowing we are not alone in our struggles with faith? As we wrestle with our understanding of God, through these days of wilderness, we join company with countless generations, even the Biblical writers themselves.

So, when you struggle with your faith, it doesn't make it weak, it makes it real. A faith that struggles with the realities of this life isn't inadequate, its biblical.

On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, there were several things happening at once in the church building. In the Lisa Kaufman Hall, Gradye and several of our local artists had designed a meditative walk, with a self-guided liturgy and prayers, as members of our community looked upon several striking works of art. And at the end of the procession, Gradye and I took turns standing with ashes. When it was my turn, I put ashes in the sign of the cross on your foreheads or hands, saying these words: "Remember we come from dust, and to dust we will return. And in life and in death we belong to God."

At one point, that afternoon, my son was downstairs for choir. And, his sister, my 3-year-old daughter, and several other children and teenagers, who had previously been through the Ash Wednesday meditation, were playing outside in our courtyard, waiting for their siblings to finish choir.

At that time, we had only one or two members going through the Ash Wednesday meditation. And right outside, we could hear the sounds of children playing in the courtyard, getting louder and louder. At one point, as I was waiting at the end of the line, with ashes in hand, I heard my daughter, in the next room, shouting, “Hey, can you open the door?” to one of the children playing outside – she must have gone in for a minute and wanted to come back out to play.

In a flash of parental shame, I almost went out to tell her to be quiet, for those making their way through the Ash Wednesday meditation, but I stopped myself. Because I also had that Ash Wednesday affirmation running through my head, that “In life and in death we belong to God.” And it struck me so suddenly, that in that moment, it was all there: life and death, set beside one another. A prayerful, meditative Ash Wednesday service, concentrating on the fact of our mortality, interspersed with the sounds of children playing.

In that one moment, it all seemed to fit together: mortality, scripture, ashes, playful shouts, solemn prayers – all of it a poignant illustration, of the fact we do not go through our wilderness alone. Beside us in the journey, is a community of faith, walking with us through this pilgrim life, in all its bitter reality, in all its joyful celebration. And, it’s not just the physical community that is present; it is also the community of our ancestors in the faith that guides us; those who lived these questions as well, and handed down their wisdom to us, in tradition, in Scripture.

So, if you find yourself lost along the way in this Lenten journey, know you are in good company. May this company be your light, may it be your hope, on this wilderness road we call the life of faith.

And as we journey together, perhaps, perhaps we will even see the face of God, in the faces of those around us.

Through the faces of that great company
(past, present, and future):

let us remember the one who always remembers us;
let us cling to the one who will never leave us forsaken.

Amen.