

**“A Rainbow for Lent”**  
Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

The dilemma confronting me this week was which text to preach from? The Gospel reading for today is Mark’s version of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, which provides the pattern for the forty days of Lent. Mark’s account is bare bones. There is no three-fold temptation, changing stones to bread and so on, as there is in Matthew and Luke. All Mark tells us is that Jesus was driven into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. Mark doesn’t even say that he fasted, although it is hard to imagine that there was much to eat out there in the wilderness.

Still, this bare bones account has its appeal. Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness tempted by Satan; Jesus out there, as Mark says, with the wild beasts, with angels waiting on him – it has a kind of attraction. In a way I like it even better than the other versions with their descriptions of the temptations. It leaves more room for the imagination. What was going on out there for forty days?

I am a sucker for the wilderness. I can’t get enough of it. Or maybe I should say, I can’t get enough of seeing other people trying to survive in the wilderness. I have probably seen just about all the episodes of *Survivorman* and *Man Vs. Wild*. No way am I going to eat a snake or pull meat off a carcass that has been lying around for who knows how long, much less chow down on a grub or a maggot! I don’t care how well cooked it is. But it is entertaining to watch other people do that. And I also love the idea of wilderness as metaphor, how we all have wilderness experiences in our lives, times of barrenness and testing. So the Gospel reading was pretty attractive!

But then there is the Genesis reading for today – the story of God’s covenant with Noah after the flood and the sign of that covenant, the rainbow! How can anyone preaching in this sanctuary not take the opportunity, when it presents itself, to preach on this text when we have right in front of us (or at least right in front of all of you) perhaps one of the best, certainly one of the most valuable, stained glass depictions of a rainbow that can be found anywhere in the world? And yet, as beautiful as the Tiffany rainbow is, it pales in comparison to the real thing.

Rainbows in nature have the power to fascinate and delight. We know that there is a rational explanation for rainbows according to the laws of physics that any middle school student who has taken a general science class can probably explain. One person put it like this: “When sunlight strikes the upper walls of a raindrop at just the right angle, the light is bent, or refracted, and escapes at the bottom of the raindrop. When this happens to millions of raindrops at the same time, there is a rainbow with multicolored layers: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.” (*Climbing Rainbows: A Sermon Based on Genesis 9:8-16*, David B. Calhoun, in *Presbyterion*, 20 no 1 Spr 1994, p 3-7)

And yet, in the faith community, despite this rational explanation, rainbows carry some other meaning for us. They are part of our sacred story. So I decided to go with the rainbow.

But the first problem is that the rainbow seems somehow out of place in this season of Lent. a season traditionally stark and austere. We don’t even sign up people to bring flowers for the chancel during Lent. The symbols for Lent are dark and somber, a cloth-draped cross, ashes for Ash Wednesday. What we want in Lent are reminders of our sinfulness and mortality and of our need to repent.

And yet, there it is in the first reading on the first Sunday in Lent, the lectionary committee choosing for some reason to let us have some bright colors and a symbol of hope and promise. I want to suggest that it might not be a bad symbol for Lent.

First of all, it reminds us that our spirituality cannot be disembodied and disconnected. It cannot be the kind that is so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good. God's covenant with Noah was one that was centered on the earth. It was a covenant that God made that never again would God destroy the earth with a flood. And it was made not only with humans, but with the animals and, in fact, with the earth itself.

"...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...."  
 God making covenant with aardvarks and alligators, squirrels and sloths, camels and caterpillars...a solemn promise that never again would God send such thorough destruction upon the earth.

Whatever Lent may mean to us, and whatever our Christian faith may mean to us, it must be rooted in the world in which we live. Our Christianity must be concerned with others, with other people and with other living creatures and with the earth in which we live.

Where I really connect with Lent is with the meaning of the word, which refers to the lengthening of days. It is a time to begin reconnecting with nature. The covenant with Noah speaks to the concern we should have for our world and for all of its creatures. We are stewards of the earth. That is one thing.

And another has to do with repentance, a very Lenten theme. The most interesting part of the story of the rainbow for me is that it is God who does an about face, a turn around, which is what the word repentance means. You are going one direction, and you change your mind, you turn around and you go the other direction.

That is what God did. God said to Noah:  
 "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." And it is almost like God is saying: "I overreacted."

Most of us should be able to relate to that. Someone does something or says something to offend us and we let them have it. We unload. We pull out all the stops. And then later we think, maybe I overdid it. Maybe I shouldn't have said what I said. We can all understand that kind of repentance, I think.

The rainbow, interestingly enough, was put in the sky, according to the text, not to remind people of the covenant, but to remind God. God says that when he sees the rainbow, "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." That is another thing.

And finally, I think the rainbow is a good symbol for Lent to remind us that there is no point in being down in the mouth. Lent should not be morbid.

I have always liked what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount about looking dismal: “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting....But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face....” Put a little make up on. Straighten your tie, comb your hair, look good.

In this time of economic downturn, crashing financial markets, failing banks, people losing jobs by the hundreds of thousands...maybe the rainbow as a symbol isn't such a bad idea. It is a hopeful symbol.

And what is interesting is that the rainbow in other ancient cultures was seen as an ominous sign. It represented to them a bow, a weapon, used by the gods.

Even in Hebrew the word for the war bow and the rainbow is the same word. But the Hebrews had another interpretation of the rainbow. They saw it as a weapon that had been disarmed. It was pointed harmlessly upward. And it was connected with the story of the flood and with God's promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood. The rainbow, for them, was a sign of hope and promise, a symbol of peace.

Biblical scholars tell us that the flood narrative comes from about the sixth century before Christ, which would put it in the time of the exile, when the people of Israel were a displaced people. A time of chaos. For those people living in exile from their homeland, torn away from all that was dear to them and forced to live in the land of another people and to work for them in servitude, the story of the flood and of God's promise that followed in the rainbow, must have provided some hope.

We Christians should understand how a negative symbol can become positive. The symbol of the Christian faith is a cross. An cruel instrument designed for nothing but the infliction of pain. A means of capital punishment, yet one not made for causing death in a swift and humane way, but for prolonging death. Yet it has become the sign and symbol of the Christian faith, one that speaks to us new life, of forgiveness, of a new creation. We stand in that faith tradition with our spiritual forebears who at the end of the worst devastation they could imagine, found hope in the sign of the rainbow and in the promise of God.

So I offer you the symbol of the rainbow for this season of Lent – colorful, bright, a sign of hope and promise, a reminder that sometimes we may go too far in our desire for getting back at someone, and may need to turn around and repent; and a symbol that connects our spiritually and roots it firmly in the world in which we live, a world full of people and other creatures that we have a stake in. Not a bad symbol for Lent.