

Our Secret Weapon

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Genesis 9:8-17 - Is the flood narrative really a tale for children? When God unleashes the rains from heaven and the waters of the earth, almost everyone and everything dies, a horrifying story. In the aftermath of the disaster, when the waters have receded, God makes a promise, a covenant, with Noah. God swears by the sign of the rainbow never again to punish the earth with a flood; in this covenant, God signs and seals a treaty of peace with humankind.

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 1:9-15 Once more, we're back in the first chapter of Mark. We hear God's words identifying Jesus as "Beloved Son," the same name we heard from the cloud on the mountain, when Jesus was transfigured with glory. But does God speak only to show approval to the listeners, or also to prepare Jesus for what is to come? In both cases, a time of testing quickly follows.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our God, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen

I'd like to begin by honoring the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of the Dakota Oyate people and their ancestors, who lived on and cared for the land where I am standing today, in Rochester. And I also honor the ancestors and tribes whose names I don't know, who cared for the lands that those of you joining in from other places now call home.

We heard the story of how God hung a rainbow as a sign of the promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood. God is not just painting a pretty picture in the sky, God is hanging up a weapon, a war bow, as a reminder never again to destroy the earth by flood. God says, "When the bow is in the clouds, *I will see it and remember* the everlasting covenant between me and every living creature." Do you remember how that story began? In Genesis 6 we read,

The Holy One, the Creator, 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 Holy One *repented* of making humankind on the earth, and was grieved to the heart, and said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for *I am sorry* that I have made them."

We know what happens in between. Noah built an ark, and took his family with him, and also creatures of every kind. And water poured down from heaven and gushed up from earth and destroyed every other living thing. After it stopped, Noah sent out a dove to explore the earth, and when it returned with an olive twig, he knew the waters were subsiding and they would be safe. In this story, we have three symbols of peace: the dove, the olive branch, and the rainbow.

Also in this story, we hear something we don't usually think of about God: God repented. And God relented. God repented of creating human beings; and God relented from destroying creation. You see, even God can have a change of heart, a change of mind.

Let me tell you another story, a story that's been part of me for as long as the story of Noah. For this story, I thank the Yankton Lakota Sioux who protected and preserved the land around my hometown of Pipestone, and Lame Deer, who told this story as he heard it from his mother.

A really long time when the world was still freshly made, Unktehi the water monster fought the people and caused a great flood. Perhaps the Great Spirit, Wakan Tanka, was angry with us for some reason. Maybe he let Unktehi win out because he wanted to make a better kind of human being. Well, the waters got higher and higher. Finally everything was flooded except the hill next to the place where the sacred red pipestone quarry lies today. The people climbed up there to save themselves, but it was no use. The water swept over that hill. Waves tumbled the rocks and pinnacles, smashing them down on the people. Everyone was killed, and all the blood jelled, making one big pool.

But one beautiful girl survived the flood and was rescued by the great spotted eagle. The two married and the girl gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, and their mother saw them and said, "Washtay," "It is good." And these children created the Lakota Oyate, an eagle nation.

But the blood that was spilled turned to pipestone and created the pipestone quarry, the grave of those ancient ones. That's why the pipe, made of that red rock, is so sacred to Native peoples. Its red bowl is the flesh and blood of our ancestors, its stem is the backbone of those people long dead, the smoke rising from it is their breath. Thus far, Lame Deer.

We know this as the peace pipe, smoked in a sacred ceremony to seal treaties, as a reminder of the promise not to fight again, as a reminder that war ends badly. Can you recognize the similarity between these stories: the flood, the remnant spared, a bird, symbols of peace and healing? Seeing the new start and calling it good, as God called creation good? You may draw your own conclusion, but what I see is that different spiritual traditions can carry the same truth. Human beings fall into error, into evil and violence. And the Creator repents of creating them, and sets out to destroy them, or let them be destroyed. But then, the Creator also relents - God's heart softens toward them - and they are given a reset, another chance. And they are given reminders: the red stone of the peace pipe, the dove and olive branch, and the rainbow. To remind--not just them but the Creator--that love must prevail. And peace must prevail.

This is our secret weapon: that we are made in the image of God. And if God can repent and change course, then we can too. And if God can relent and soften toward humans who hurt one another so badly, then we can soften toward those who hurt us, too. As Mark Neville reminded us in our Blue Sky conversation last week, as the song goes, people have to be taught to hate; "you've got to be carefully taught." And we can be taught to love, too. If we can learn how to make weapons, we can learn to set them aside as God did, hanging up the war bow in the sky. If we can learn how to make war, we can learn how to make peace. We have to be reminded and we have to be taught.

If there is a universal truth that transcends cultures and faith traditions, why can't we try to learn a universal language of peace? When we look around the table at our own conversation, who is missing? What tools have we neglected? Tools of deep listening, of questioning the assumption that we hold the moral high ground? Tools of curiosity, seeking out and studying true histories that never found their way into our school books? Have we neglected the god-given gifts of repentance and forgiveness? Have we even forgotten how to sing together? Shouting words of blame makes a painful noise. But when we sing together, we make harmony. We have to pick up the right tools as weapons: our ears and our voices, our kindness, our desire to understand. Martin Luther King said it clearly: "Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the [one] who wields it. It is a sword that heals."

After Jesus was baptized, he was driven into the desert to be tested by Satan, literally, “by the adversary.” Mark doesn’t record that conversation; Matthew and Luke do. Jesus overcame not by fighting but by seeking and claiming a better path than the conquest and domination Satan offered. This was Jesus’ equivalent of a Native American vision quest and he returned from his quest on fire with a message: “Repent and believe the good news: the kingdom of God has come near.” Do we believe this, that God’s kingdom *is* among us, here and now? Do we need to relent and soften toward sisters and brothers and “others” who see things differently? Do we need a change of heart, a change of mind? If God could change, why can’t we, made in God’s image?

Last Tuesday in Bible study, one of the Presbyterian Wise Women asked whether what’s happening in the world right now is telling us we need a “reset,” a new start. This is a good question. Are we ready for a reset, or are we too wedded to our current ways of being and doing? This is what we are up to in our conversation today and going forward. Asking again and again: “What does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to follow Jesus? What values come with this identity? How can we live those values? What do we cling to as our deepest truth? Where do we need a reset? If you are here today, your voice is important. We all need to speak. And we all need to listen. And be assured, if we are serious about this, Jesus will walk with us. TBTG.

Indebtedness

If you are interested in learning the names and language of the Indigenous people who inhabited the place you lived before, as well as the treaties by which they ceded those lands to the US government, you can find that information here: <https://native-land.ca/>. To find the Lakota flood story and many other little-known histories from Native American wisdom, check here: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/unktehi-and-the-flood-as-told-by-lame-deer.htm>

Prayers

**Holy God, Creator, Great Mystery, you show up to bless and teach all your human children; you keep your promises not just to men and women but to all living things on earth. We bow before your wisdom, and ask that you will keep showing us your ways of peace.

**Give us attentive and curious minds, ready to listen and willing to change when change is needed. Bless this community of faith as we discern together what is the future you are calling us to. Remind us of your covenant, your resolve to hang up the weapons of war and take up Jesus’ way of non-violence, vulnerability, and love for all people.

**So many places in the world are troubled, painful, harmful to our brothers and sisters living there. We remember especially today the people of Myanmar, the people of Yemen and the rest of the Middle East; the people of Texas. Voices raised in blame hurt the ears; teach us instead to sing together.

**We remember those with covid; those separated from loved ones, and any struggling in any way. Reweave the bonds of love among and between us all, for we ask this in Jesus’ name and pray as he taught us....Our Father who art in heaven...