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

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

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Genesis 9:8-17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹I 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.”

¹²God 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: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶When 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.” ¹⁷God 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

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Somewhere over the rainbow way up high
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby
Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true

Someday I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far
Behind me
Where troubles melt like lemon drops
Away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me

Somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly
Birds fly over the rainbow. Why then, oh, why can't I?

If happy little bluebirds fly
Beyond the rainbow why, oh, why can't I?

When I read the Genesis text the song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” immediately came into my head, and I knew that would be the title for today’s sermon.

Now the reason may seem very obvious – simply because of “rainbow” in the song’s title and the text from Genesis is about God putting a bow in the clouds – the origin story of rainbows. But as I discerned how I would stay on topic with the title and today’s scripture readings, it became very personal and far less obvious. I understand this Genesis passage in new ways.

I have 3 sisters. My youngest sister, Becky, died from ovarian cancer in 2011. We were extremely close and her living with illness and her death have been the most difficult and painful times in my life. Now Becky was a *Wizard of Oz* aficionado. She LOVED that movie. She knew it backwards and forwards, every line of every character, about all of the actors. She requested that “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” be sung at her funeral, as she felt it was a part of her identity. People who knew Becky would always think of her when they heard this song.

But what did my sister and the song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” have to do with the story of God being in covenant with Noah, his family, and all flesh? I struggled with that question for days and I finally determined it wasn’t only the rainbow, it was the clouds. God put a bow in the clouds. Dorothy sang about waking up where clouds were far behind her. And don’t all of us want to “wake up where the clouds are far behind us, where troubles melt like lemon drops?”

Now when I mentioned to someone that today’s text was about God’s covenant with Noah, her response was – and I am paraphrasing – Yeah, I wish God would keep a covenant? I really wondered about that. Is it not so much about God breaking covenants, but of our breaking of covenant with God? Take for example, Dorothy’s wish, and ours to not struggle or suffer. When we deny the reality that suffering is inextricably linked to living what are we missing?

It disturbs me how little we, as a society, and as individuals avoid our feelings of sorrow, pain, suffering. In our own lives we work really hard to pretend everything is okay. Cultural norms force us to rush grief. Most of us are allowed five to zero days off from work to mourn. When we get back to work we are supposed to act as if

nothing has happened. We are expected to perform as we did before our world changed forever.

And we expect it of ourselves.

While we say we know that life is both good and bad, we work really, really hard to either avoid the bad or pretend it isn't happening. We separate our suffering and the suffering of others from the wholeness of life.

I believe this is not only unhealthy for our own lives, it is unhealthy for society, for all of creation.

I can't help but think that the increasing rates of addiction, suicide, mental illness, and violence are not at some level the result of an unspeakable taboo on revealing our pain and our grief. Homelessness, non-livable wages, access to healthcare based on ability to pay are the result of our inability or unwillingness to see the pain, the struggle, the suffering of others.

For me, being in covenant with God is to accept our suffering as a necessary facet of being human. Without acknowledging and living into our suffering we cannot be whole.

In Mark's text the author writes that immediately after Jesus is baptized, the Spirit drives him into the wilderness. A wilderness where Jesus suffers for 40 days. This tells me that to be fully human necessarily involves suffering. Would Jesus have been such a powerful healer if he had not, himself, suffered? Would he have noticed the suffering of others as vividly as he did? Would he have taken on the powers that be that still perpetuate oppression, injustice, and inequality?

Likewise, can we be the disciples we are called to be, that we strive to be, if we ignore, dismiss, or resist suffering? How authentic is life when we suppress that which is as much a part of life as the joys? Can we recognize the suffering of others when they suffer in silence?

As words of encouragement and hope Becky shared with me more than once "you can't have a rainbow without a little rain."

In all of this, may we trust that God has not broken covenant. Rather, God offers us the beauty of the rainbow when all around us it is raining, and God offers us the vision by way of the rainbow when the sun is shining down on us that we may see the rain falling on others.

Yet, surely all of us want to dare to dream dreams that really do come true. And it is my Christian faith that makes me believe that someday we will be somewhere over the rainbow. That in our deaths we will experience

only blue skies, where every tear will be wiped away. We will experience eternal peace. What that looks like or feels like I do not know. What I do know is that we can reach for rainbows here and now, reach for God's covenant that offers unconditional love and presence in our joys and in our sorrows. And we can be, are called to be, rainbows to one another, covenanting with one another and with God to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, and heal the sick, ending the suffering that need not be, recognizing and allowing for the suffering that must be.

I share with you a poem by Ann Weems:

Reaching for Rainbows

I keep reaching for rainbows...

Thinking one God's morning

I will wake up with rainbow ribbons in my hair,

With hurts painted over in hues that only angel wings could brush,

Black obliterated, chaos hurled beyond the rainbow and my vision,

The world created in a myriad of colors:

The hungry fed,

The dying held,

The maimed walking,

The angry stroked,

The violent calmed,

The oppressed freed,

The oppressors changed,

And every tear wiped away.

I keep reaching for rainbows,

But instead of colors in our storm,

Gray and black infiltrate, dirtying the sky,

And I hear human voices wailing in the darkness,

The never-ending darkness....

Just the same

I know the promise of the rainbow.

I keep thinking I'll turn a corner one day

And find a litany of rainbows

Flung across the sky,
Hosannaing back and forth
Through all the ages and
Out into eternity forever amen!
Every tear wiped away----It's a promise --- When we become rainbows to each other.*
Amen.

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