

A Snowmelt (Rainbow) Covenant

Genesis 9:8-17

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

Sunday, February 21, 2021

Prayer: *Holy, Holy, Holy God, you bring new life and provide signs of hope, even in bleak and daunting places. As your presence in days of old guided Noah and his loved ones to a new creation, so guide our online worship with your presence that we may be called forth into the new life you offer each one of us...*

Matt Crebbin, the Pastor of the Newtown Congregational church recently shared these words in an online devotional:

"Although the official liturgical calendar of the western church will disagree with me, I am convinced that this year's Lenten journey through the wilderness began last year on or about March 15, 2020... though the liturgical calendar has moved us through the seasons of Easter, Pentecost, Advent, Christmas and Epiphany since that day, there is a part of me that continues to experience our current life as a continuing journey through the wilderness.

Nearly everything that I thought I knew about living as the church - all the day to day, week to week, month to month, season to season - markers and activities have been altered by this journey through this strange and unknown territory called "global pandemic." Nothing is the same: worship, pastoral care, meetings, budgets, stewardship, justice advocacy – all these and many more areas have been profoundly affected by pandemic living."

I can so relate to those words as we enter this season this year. I have a sense of things coming full circle as we begin Lent and approach the one-year anniversary of the arrival of Covid-19 in North America. In some ways I can't believe it has been a year, in others I can't believe that it is only a year.

Even if the world feels like it has been upside down for quite a while now, I'd like to encourage you in this season, to lean into your experience and find the blessing that may be in it for you. What have you learned? What wisdom have you gained? In the last year when have you had one really good day? What have you found that is positive? And if we are all upside down together, how will we come back down without crashing or injury? Strengthened rather than weakened? Preserving as many lives as we can? On our feet, not on our heads...

It is snowing, but snow melts into water. Water takes many forms.

A rainbow is light and water and perspective. It reveals color which is always there --around us - - but hidden from our view. This Lenten season 2021 we will be reflecting on perspective: point of view, angle and yes, bias. Scripture is full of spiritual reversals. Reversals describe something elemental about the human condition. Noah's flood is a story of a massive reversal -- from devastation to restoration -- the rainbow is the symbol of God's covenant and an enduring symbol of serendipity and hope.

Genesis 9 contains some of the oldest writing we have in the Bible; scholars call it the "primeval Yahwistic" history. The other very old material that we have describes other catastrophes: the destruction of the *Tower of Babel* and the destruction of *Sodom and Gomorrah*. Each describe

erasures of communities with drama and heartache, and go on to fill in details about new beginnings. It makes sense that these stories would be the ones that get passed down.

When I was a first year student in Divinity school I was shocked to learn in my Old Testament class that flood stories are common across many ancient civilizations. Many of them astonishingly similar to the story of Noah. For me, in addition to the account of destruction in the story which is cause for mourning, there is a history here that has to do with real people dying in large numbers, I also found a certain destruction of my own Christian exceptionalism in this knowledge. And needed to pause a moment with that. It means that ancient civilizations struggled widely with major flooding, epic, devastating flooding, and some of them lived to tell the tale.¹ It has opened my mind to the realities of other people telling the same story from another point of view, legitimately.

Perspective is at issue with Noah and his family in more than one way. There was destruction, and then there was the life that came afterwards. And their symbol was a rainbow, which is made up of: light, and water, and the angle of where you happen to be standing. Whether you are convinced God intended you to stand there from the beginning of time, or you believe you never deserved to be there; or maybe something to do with chance, either way, there you are. Sometimes, you get a rainbow, legitimately in your perspective. (I should apologize to those who are color blind at this point – but I also want to affirm your own perspective and experience of the world.)

The way this text is written, God is the one who sees the rainbow “when the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant...”² When you make a covenant you need to certify it somehow. (A marriage covenant is often sealed with rings.) This covenant is sealed by God setting God’s weapon down³, like an archery bow, in the sky facing away from humanity as a sign of God’s commitment not to flood the earth again. God sees the bow, and God is reminded of this covenant. God’s perspective includes rainbows throughout history, geography, and atmospheric conditions. And this covenant is for Noah first and for all living creatures, regardless of perspective or identity, or ability to see color. God continues to see that rainbow, whether it is snowing, or sunny, or raining, or foggy -- which describes the weather just this week in Connecticut. God sees the symbol of that covenant, regardless of our decisions or experience.

It was great to see a number of you at our Ash Wednesday *Ashes to Go* station in the parking lot at the church. Amie and I enjoyed our time outside in the fresh air, talking with some of you; we changed rubber gloves in between distributions which seemed to work well enough.

The traditional Ash Wednesday message when you receive ashes on your head or hand is “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Those are poetic words and they echo back to the first chapter of Genesis, God formed Adam from the dust of the earth, and throughout scripture when someone repents it is “in dust and ashes.” (There is even a place in the book of Jonah where the chickens and goats put on dust and ashes and repent of their sins. I love that detail. I have no idea what it means.) What I find remarkable about the words “remember you are dust and that to dust you shall return” is that people can relate to it two ways: some find it sobering; and others find their burdens lifted by it. You can go either way –

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_flood_myths 2/18/2021

² Genesis 9:16

³ Psalm 7:12-13; Hab 3:9-11

tears or laughter – depends on your perspective. If you are taking yourself too seriously or not taking yourself seriously enough. You are either ready to go write your last will and testament, establish your health care proxies; or bake a cake and throw a party... or in these conditions, maybe just leave a slice of cake for a neighbor on their porch and wave. We're just dust, so let's make the most of the time! Perspective.

If you are investing too much of yourself in things that do not matter, it can be a reminder to lighten up, let things go, remember that there are few certainties in life. If you are not engaging enough of yourself, it is time to get real, precisely because life is ephemeral. A gift we do not entirely control. A lot like a rainbow: always there; rarely visible; serendipitous.

If this sounds contradictory it is. One of the ways we live in faith is to embrace contradictions. Jesus said in the sermon on the mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy⁴

It is by being honest about our losses that we find life's value. Those are words to ponder on... for a lifetime. There are gifts, there are blessings, even in our deepest losses, and yes, even in this time of pandemic.

*This is why Mardi Gras carnival and feasting precedes the season of Lent, for many a season of fasting and prayer

* why our ancestors came to this country and described their hopes for this new world in terms of a new Jerusalem, a city on a hill... a vision born of their own dashed hopes in another part of the world, in cities that were disappointments...

*this is why enslaved people found a map to freedom sustained by the spiritual story of the Exodus in scripture

It is by noticing what we have lost, that we will find our way. And we each have our own perspective on what we have lost, what has been lost in this pandemic and in our lives. Today I'd like to remind you that your perspective is legitimate; (whether you are inclined to take yourself too seriously or not seriously enough) and God is looking at you through a rainbow covenant; bending all of this towards blessing.

It's a contradiction. It's faith. And maybe as we approach the one-year mark, a little familiar: God is love. Still.

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⁴ Matthew 5: 3-7