

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year A

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Text: Genesis 6:16-22; 9:8-15

Title: “A Way Out of No Way: Saved”

On Tuesday at 7:23 p.m. on my way home from meeting with the Finance Committee, it was pouring rain as I pulled on to US 10. A few miles down the road I noticed a rainbow taking shape. A mile or so further and I saw the rainbow you see on the slide. I had to stop and take a photo. Because I now have an iPhone with “pano” capabilities, I was able to get the whole rainbow in one photograph. Someone else driving by saw me standing there taking the photograph and when I got back in the truck, I passed a woman doing the same thing a few hundred yards down the road.

There is something about a rainbow I still find fascinating and beautiful and I’m not alone. Without fail, every time I see one I think of Noah and this story from the book of Genesis as God instructs Noah:

16 Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.  
17 For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. 18 But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. 19 And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. 20 Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. 21 Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.” 22 Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

8 Then 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, 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. 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.” 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: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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. (Genesis 6:16-22; 9:8-15)

In the next 6 Sundays we will be exploring the Hebrew Bible stories of God urging people forward in times when it seems there is no way out. The odds are impossible. The way forward impassible, and yet somehow a way is found. Somehow the people of God find their way through.

We begin with Noah and the flood. The context of this story like all stories is so important. You might remember that the whole ark building was predicated on the frustration God has with human beings. It's deeper than frustration, though. Earlier in the chapter it is written that...

...every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. <sup>7</sup> So the LORD 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.”

God's heart was broken by the behaviors witnessed on the earth so much so that God thought wiping them out was the way to handle that heartbreak. This experiment didn't work the first time, so it was time to start over with a clean slate. And so we have the flood and one whom God has chosen to live beyond the flood, a covenant partner God trusts who will carry on life on earth after it's all destroyed. But first, they must endure the storm.

Yesterday I listened to the governor of Florida, Rick Scott, urging people to get out of the Keys, get out of Miami and get to evacuation centers. It was the first Category 5 hurricane to hit Cuba since 1924, and the first to be predicted to hit St. Petersburg as a direct hit in nearly a century. By now the Keys have been hit--7 or 8 a.m. was the prediction I read least. It's one of the largest emergency evacuations in U.S. history and already 200,000 Floridians are without power. That was before any news after it actually hit the state. It's a dangerous storm.

We are also well aware of the power of Harvey as it hit Texas and left at least 70 people dead and a city of over 2 million flooded after nearly 52 inches of rain fell on the region. Thirty three billion gallons some analyzers indicated. Some might wonder if God was renegeing on the promise made in Genesis. And, of course, there are always those who will lay such things at the feet of God for the wickedness of human beings. It never fails that someone will blame God and point out all the evil for which we are to be punished.

Yet, such interpretations focus on the pre-flood God, the God who is so frustrated that the only way God can see to change the situation is to start with a fresh slate, wipe everything and

everyone out and begin again.

Now I can imagine my parents feeling something like this whenever I or my brother exasperated them. Sometimes I imagine they might have wanted to begin all over again or questioned their wisdom in having children at all. You know those moments—which aren't long lived or frequent--when you're at wits ends with your children and you're just so frustrated you want to scream, and maybe you do! But, of course, you never would go to such extremes. They are your children, after all. And loving them sometimes means enduring less than you'd hoped for behaviors. Loving them means sticking with them, hopefully as your parents stuck with you.

So this heartbroken God sticks with Noah and his family and like Governor Scott-- only with far more authority--warns him to get to the evacuation center he's going to build. God tells him how to build it and to stock it not only with supplies but with creatures of every kind that life will continue beyond the storm. God is giving Noah a way out of no way. When it appears as though life as God created it was hopeless, God offers a way out.

Have you experienced such a time when it seemed there was no way out, the way forward just wasn't clear? Maybe your heart was broken like God's and it hurt so much that it just wasn't clear what the next steps in your life might be?

I was busy and deeply preoccupied in seminary studies. Stressed a lot by the demands of a rigorous academic program when we learned that Lynn was pregnant. It was 1983. We were young and anxious about being parents but when she told me the news I was so excited I did a happy dance, which says a lot because I don't dance. It's an ugly thing when I dance but I didn't care. This was great news!

And so after the announcement in our excitement we began sharing the news. She was in the first trimester so you couldn't really tell but we couldn't help ourselves. Our first child! We couldn't keep it to ourselves. In our excitement we even decided on a name: if it was a boy we would call him Christopher which means "bearer of Christ" in the Greek from which it comes.

But then in her third month, she began having difficulties. And when her parents came to visit during that time, we took her to the hospital in Columbus. To the ER. And there in the morning hours I stayed with her as the miscarriage happened. Our first child!

We learned, of course, that it was nothing unusual. Twenty five percent of pregnancies end in miscarriage. Lynn didn't do anything wrong. It just happens. Still, the excitement turned to grief. And though this kind of loss isn't like the loss experienced by losing a four year old whom you've held and nurtured and cared for, I felt numb, not sure how to feel about it. Not sure what would come next, if you know what I mean. Okay God what now?

Noah did what he understood God to be directing him to do. He followed the orders given and on the other side of the flood when the inhabitants--human and animal-- had left the evacuation center of the ark, we hear God talking to himself. Genesis has it that the Lord said in his heart but we get to overhear:

"I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

<sup>22</sup> As long as the earth endures,  
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,  
summer and winter, day and night,  
shall not cease.”

God acknowledges to himself that this method of starting with a clean slate has not worked, that it's simply the flawed nature of human beings that results in evil expressing itself. And God promises himself this will never be done again. No wiping out the human race to begin again. So this is the first promise God makes after the flood.

The second promise God makes to Noah when God tells Noah:

"As for me, I now establish my covenant with you and your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the wild animals, the domesticated animals, all the earth's creatures with you that came out of the ark — all the earth's creatures" (Gen. 9:9-10)

Notice that this promise God makes, this covenant, is made with all the earth's creatures. It's not just Noah and other human beings but all of creation—every living creature. The mosquito and the muskrat as well as with Moses and Miriam! Nothing is left out. And it's a promise that is completely one-sided. God doesn't ask anything from Noah. It's all God. There aren't any strings attached to this promise. You and I and our cats and dogs don't need to do anything to receive it. It just is. So first and foremost, God promises no more floods. Though this one came as a result of human evil, it seems clear that evil still exists in the human heart but nevertheless God will not destroy human beings again as a way to begin again.

Another part of God's promise comes in the beautiful symbol of the rainbow:

“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”

The word used for “bow” here is the same that is used for the bow of war. So the sign of this covenant promise God makes is that God is hanging up this weapon of destruction and hanging it in the sky for all to see, and yet, God doesn't put it there according to Genesis that we might see it but that it will be a way for God to remember. No fewer than three times it says this in Genesis. The bow is to remind God. It's like the post-it note or the string tied around the finger to remind God that the war bow is no more and that this is the end of God responding to frustration and heartbrokenness with destruction in such a way. Floods for human sin are no longer an option.

Now God's primary role is to make a way for all creatures to thrive and live even through the devastations we experience in life. God will find a new way to deal with the evils of human beings, and that new way comes in the Christ who as the apostle Paul wrote the Romans

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

God's new way would not be to kill in order to start anew but rather to die himself to prove God's love for us. What a difference! From a God who destroys in order to save who then hangs up that destructive impulse and hangs his weapon in the sky to God who willingly dies himself to reveal the lengths to which God will go to prove how much God loves every one. This is God's way out of no way. This is God's way of dealing with evil. The cross of Christ is that new way born out of the failure of the old way of destruction.

When Lynn and I were still feeling numb from the miscarriage of Christopher and didn't really know the way forward except to just keep going in life, there were a lot of well-meaning people who tried to offer support, some of which was not helpful. As with hurricanes, there is always someone trying to blame God for such things. One woman who was one of my Sunday school teachers wrote to us trying to be empathetic and bring some kind of meaning, some rationale to such a death, saying something like God needed the child more than we did or God loved the child more than we did, something like that, which is, of course, complete dribble. The only thing the note succeeded in doing was creating anger in both of us.

But then another woman, a fellow student asked if she could come over to our apartment. Terry was her name. She was older, a second career student. And when the three of us sat down she told us her story. She had lost a couple of children to miscarriage and she grieved the losses, but she affirmed it's just something that happens. No one is to blame. She said, "I just want you to know that I'm here if you need anything or if you'd just like to talk about it." She pointed out that she now has a great family. I think she had four kids and a great husband, noting that these things are not the end, that life does go on and that God is still good.

And of course, Terry was so right. God urges us on when we face the perils of life, when we can't see a way forward, when it looks like there isn't a way forward. God makes a way out of no way, and three years later we had a son: Joshua Nathanael we called him because it means in Hebrew "God gave us a gift."

That bow in the sky, of course, might be there to remind God of God's promise but it also reminds us of that same promise. Never again a flood. Never again destruction as a means to begin again. Always finding a way out of no way. That is the promise of our God.