1

Children

This morning I need all of you to help me understand a verse of scripture. It's from the ninth chapter of Genesis, verse 13. It says, I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

When God said to Noah, "I have set my bow in the clouds," what kind of 'bow' did God mean? Was it the kind of bow you shoot arrows with? The eight girls and one small boy seated on the chancel steps grin at my silliness and shake their heads to indicate no.

Was it the kind of bow some folks wear in their hair, like these? I point to the pink ribbons I've tied to the ends of my braids for this discussion. Again the heads shake no, while some of the children say, "No!" with a giggle attached. Was it the kind of bow Stephanie has tied in her shoelaces? The children now eye Stephanie's feet, then assure me it wasn't that kind of bow either.

No? You all keep saying, 'No!' Well, then, what kind of bow was it?

A rainbow!" says one little girl triumphantly.

Why did God set a rainbow in the clouds? I'll give you a hint -- it was after forty days and nights of rain.

To let Noah know the rain had stopped?" one of the children states with a question in her voice. "Yes, and to let Noah know that never again would God destroy everything on the earth with a flood. The rainbow was the sign of an agreement between God and all of creation, a sign that said, 'I will remember my agreement with you whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, because I love you.'

It rained on Friday. Did anyone see a rainbow that day? No? Why not? Did the sun ever come out on Friday?" Several children shake their heads indicating a negative response. "The sun never came out on Friday. The sky was cloudy all day, from before the sun came up until after the sun went down. Does that give you a hint about why there were no rainbows?"

"Because there was no sun?" comes a tentative, questioning response. Right, because there was no sun! We have to have sunlight in order to have rainbows. Do any of you know what clouds are made of? I ask with an abrupt change of direction. "Rain!" says one of the children emphatically.

Yes, I agree, clouds are made up of little drops of water. And when the sunlight shines though them what do we get? "A rainbow!" several of the children declare. That's right. Now, who made the sun, and the clouds, and the rain, and all of creation? "God did," they answer. So, if we have to have sunlight and droplets of water to make rainbows and God made the sun and the rain, I guess it must be God who makes rainbows, just as we read in the verse from Genesis.

Now, once again, what is the rainbow a sign of?

"God's agreement with Noah?"

Yes, but not just with Noah. It's a sign of God's agreement or covenant with every living creature on the earth. It's a sign God made to remind all of us that never again would God destroy everything with a flood. And it is one of the many ways God has of saying, 'I made you and I love you.'

Adult

The local sheriff was looking for a deputy, and one of the applicants - who was not known to be the brightest academically, was called in for an interview. "Okay," began the sheriff, "What is 1 and 1?" "Eleven," came the reply. The sheriff thought to himself, "That's not what I meant, but he's right."

Then the sheriff asked, "What two days of the week start with the letter 'T'?" "Today & tomorrow." Replied the applicant. The sheriff was again surprised over the answer, one that he had never thought of himself.

"Now, listen carefully, who killed Abraham Lincoln?", asked the sheriff. The job seeker seemed a little surprised, then thought really hard for a minute and finally admitted, "I don't know." The sheriff replied, "Well, why don't you go home and work on that one for a while?" The applicant left and wandered over to his pals who were waiting to hear the results of the interview. He greeted them with a cheery smile, "The job is mine! The interview went great! First day on the job and I'm already working on a murder case!"

In our Gospel reading this morning in Mark 1 it is Jesus' first day on the job. Immediately he is confronted with three major temptations. And he is confronted with this basic question: Would he take the crown without the cross?

These are the most basic temptations in life and they form the foundation for all other temptations. I would propose that when temptation comes our way; if we will pause and classify the temptation, we would be able to identify it with one of the three temptations Jesus faced. We will also be better equipped to answer Satan with the words and obedience of Christ.

This is the first Sunday in Lent. It is a time of in-depth reflection upon the passion and death of Jesus, as well as a period of repentance for both the church and for us personally. Our Lenten journey begins this year with a review of the temptation of Christ. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the Wilderness, to be in communion with God and to reflect upon his upcoming ministry. While there, Satan confronts Jesus. It is reminder to us that goodness is not synonymous with innocence. True goodness comes only after a struggle with evil.

Let's look at the three temptations:

I

The first temptation we shall call: Stone into Bread - The temptation to use power for the wrong purposes. In the first temptation, Satan addresses Jesus by saying, “If, you are the Son of God.” It may look as if Satan is questioning Jesus’ credentials but he is not. He never questions the credentials of Jesus. He knows who he is. What he is doing is trying to get Jesus to question himself, to doubt. If he can get Jesus for just a moment to question himself, to misuse his power, to take the crown without the cross, to turn the stone into bread, he will have won, and he will have forced Jesus into seducing humanity into obedience. You see this not just about Jesus being hungry after fasting for 40 days. This is Satan tempting Jesus to met need of world hunger. Use your power, the devil says, to address the issue of human hunger. Jesus would have sought to buy our affection and devotion.

But that is a false picture of mankind. We do not live for things but for intimacy. We do not live for the marketplace but for the family. Jesus put it this way, “man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”

Satan has misunderstood mankind and therefore misunderstood Jesus’ need. To be sure, he sees that he is hungry. What he does not understand is that there is another type of hunger. It is the hunger for righteousness. Jesus is feeding himself on the Word of God. Satan has challenged Jesus to feed a hungry world. What Jesus is saying is that you cannot know what is good unless you first read the scriptures. We are created to please God, to be in right relationship with God, and we must therefore go to God’s Word.

It is easy to loose track of who we are and why we are here. It is a now very long time since we were in the Garden. Sin has wrecked humanity. It is difficult to imagine what man was like in the Garden of Eden by viewing him as he is now. Imagine if you knew nothing of aircrafts and mankind’s ability of flight. Now imagine that you came upon the wreckage of an aircraft and you along with many others tried to reconstruct the original version of the aircraft. If we knew nothing of flying, we would hardly suspect that this pile of rubbish had once soared above the earth. The material would be the same; the capability of flight, however, would be lost.

What we have lost is our understanding of what mankind once was: obedient, righteous, the image of God, and a reflection of the divine. This is what Jesus reminds Satan. Bread is not how mankind lives, not solely, and not primarily. He lives in obedience to the word of God. If we come to God we come because we belong with him not because he has something for us. We come because our soul needs to be in his presence not because our belly needs to be filled.

Satan asks, wouldn’t you rather have your desires met first, your cravings satisfied in full? Wouldn’t you rather take the crown without the cross?

II

The second temptation we shall call: Fall on the Rocks: The Temptation to gain popularity by performance. And if the first temptation deals with the physical needs of Jesus, then the second deals with his reputation. The devil sits Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple. “Jump off,” he said, “for it is written, He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all ways.” This is a quote from Psalm 91. Do you see what has happened? In the first temptation Jesus has answered Satan by saying, “It is written.” Satan is a fast learner. He begins this temptation with the words, “It is written.” He is showing Jesus that he is capable of quoting scripture as well.

Jesus refuses to jump, however, quoting from yet another verse, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.” This is a quote from Duet 6.16. Does this mean that the Book of Deuteronomy is more important than the Psalms? No. But it does say that simply quoting scripture is not enough. Even Satan can do that. It is the interpretation that we give to scripture that matters. You cannot manipulate scripture for your own purpose, or even for what we perceive to be the purposes of God.

Said another way, we cannot accomplish the will of God by our own efforts. Abraham tried to do this when he lay with his maidservant Hagar and had Ishmael. God’s response was, Abraham I told you that Sarah shall have a son. In time, God’s promise is fulfilled and Isaac is born, but there is a problem. The promise of God must now be taken from the first born son, Ishmael and given to the second, Isaac. Jealousy sets in and in the end Hagar and Ishmael’s lives are ruined when they are banished from the tribe, all this because Abraham tried to force God’s promise.

You do not test a promise of God. Try to accomplish it by your own means. Even if those means are backed up with Scripture. Jesus cannot do a right thing for a wrong reason. Satan asks, wouldn’t you rather avoid the long way to accomplishing your goal? Wouldn’t you rather avoid the path that requires patience? Wouldn’t you rather circumvent suffering? Wouldn’t you rather take the crown without the cross?

III

The third temptation we shall call: Serve the Wrong Master: The temptation to idolatry. In the third temptation, Satan finally comes out in the open. He no longer flatters him by calling him Son of God. He shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and tells him that all of this will be his, if, for a just moment, he will bow down and worship him. He is saying, “You want people to follow you, do you not? Then simply blink your eyes at evil and they will come in droves.”

But Jesus refuses to change the world by becoming a part of the world. Again he quotes from Moses in the Old Testament: “You shall worship the Lord your God and He alone shall you serve.” If the world comes to Jesus it must rise up to Him, for He will not go down to it. He will not be enticed by the glitter of the world.

The trial is now over. Satan has failed in his attempt to bribe Jesus with fame, fortune, and power. At this point Jesus says, “Satan, be gone.” The implication is that Jesus has merely been tolerating the presence of Satan. But the devil does not go away empty handed. He still has all of his kingdoms and he now knows something about the nature of God. He understands God’s restraint.

Conclusion

Another important matter is that we cannot see this temptation in the Wilderness as the only time Jesus encountered evil. Clearly, he faced it over and over. Take, for example, when Jesus turned His face to Jerusalem. It was Simon Peter who tried to talk him out of it by saying, in essence, “You don’t have to do this.”

Additionally, there was the scene when Jesus was on the cross. The centurion taunts him and says, “If you are the Son of God, then jump down from the cross and save yourself.” This scene sounds hauntingly familiar to the scene where Satan challenges Jesus to jump. So Jesus struggled with evil and temptation over and over.

The crucial question for us this morning is, what does all of this mean for us? The ultimate temptation of Jesus was that He could have a crown without a cross. That is the temptation that we, His followers, still face today. We want power without painful rejection. We want risk with no danger. We want victory with limited commitment.

Some Christians say that to be a Christian means that life is all beautiful. It strikes me that the Temptation of Christ is saying something quite different. It is saying life is a struggle; life is a wilderness experience. You will be tempted by evil.

So I want to remind you today, in those times when you are in the wilderness, trying to find your way through, and when temptation comes and offers you the wrong answer, the wrong choice the wrong use of power, the way to popularity, the wrong kind of partnership then you remember that Christ was tempted as well. But he did not turn those stones into bread. He fed himself the word of God. He did not fling himself upon the rocks. He wanted no man’s approval but God’s. He did not render service to Satan. He obeyed his father in Heaven. And this, I suppose is the twist ending of Lent. If Jesus saves himself, he cannot save you. Jesus was tempted to take the crown without the cross and he did not. Would you?

2

Children

Lesson: Good morning! *(response)* This morning I am going to tell you what happened to Jesus when he started his work but before I do I need a volunteer. Choose one child. I need you to come with me and sit right here for a few minute while I talk to the other children. In front of you is a plate of 20 M&M's but I don't want you to eat any of them. OK? *(response)*

Return to the Children. Now, where were we? Oh, yes. When Jesus started his work do you know what he had to do? *(response)*He had to go out into a desert. Who knows what a desert is? Describe a desert for me? *(response)* That's right and Jesus had to stay in the desert where there was very little water and no food. For 40 days he didn't eat anything and he was very hungry. You know what happened next? *(response)*

The devil came up to Jesus there in that desert and tempted Jesus. The devil offered him some bread. But Jesus wasn't going to take any bread from the devil. He told the devil that we don't live by simply eating bread; we live by God's laws and God's commands.

Have you ever been tempted to do something you know you are not supposed to do? What did you do? *(response)* Let's see how "John" has done. Bring the child and plate back to the group. You could have the children count the M&M's with you or count them yourself.

If any were eaten: There's only 12 M&M's what happened? *(response)* I told him not to eat the M&M's. He ate 8 of them! Why did you do that? *(response)* Address the Children: John couldn't resist the temptation. He gave in didn't he? *(response)* Why do you think he did that? *(response)* If no M&M's were eaten: There's twenty M&M's. He didn't eat a one. I can' believe it! Why didn't he eat them? *(you told him not to)*

Jesus was tempted just like john but his temptation came after not eating for 40 days and it was the devil who wanted him to eat. Jesus did not give in. He obeyed God and we should too no matter how sweet and tempting the food is.

Let's pray: Father we want to be like Jesus and obey your laws and your commands. Help us not to give in to temptation. Amen.

ChristianGlobe Network, Inc, , by Brett Blair

I

There are many unusual tourist attractions in the U.S., but recently I heard of one that sounds both fascinating and depressing at the same time. There is a museum in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I understand, that has as its unofficial name, “The Museum of Failed Products.” Ponder that name for a few moments, “The Museum of Failed Products.”

The museum looks like a standard supermarket inside. However, all the items on the shelves are products that were taken off the market because nobody bought them.

I wonder why? Wouldn’t you want to buy Clairol’s Touch of Yogurt shampoo? Sounds yummy. Or Gillette’s “For Oily Hair Only” shampoo? Sounds like a great product. Or Pepsi’s AM Breakfast Cola, that was supposed to compete with coffee as a morning pick-me-up. And why didn’t we all get excited about Colgate-brand TV dinners? Or Fortune Snookies, the fortune cookies for dogs? Doesn’t your pet like to read their fortune each day? The museum also has displays of such wild ideas as caffeinated beer, microwaveable scrambled eggs in a tube, and breath mints that look like little packages of cocaine. (1)

Can you imagine the disappointment of the inventor who poured his or her time, energy, and intellect into creating a product no matter how unusual, only to have it fail? How disheartening to have your creation end up in the “Museum of Failed Products.”

I wonder if God doesn’t sometimes look at us, the pinnacle of His creation, and wonder with disappointment how we turned out the way we did? Is humanity one of God’s failed products? It’s something to think about as we look at today’s Bible passage.

The Old Testament is full of exhilarating stories of very ordinary people possessed by an extraordinary faith. Consider Noah. At God’s direction Noah built an Ark that was of enormous proportions:  300 cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. In the words of the old joke, Noah asked God, “What’s a cubit?” God scratched His head for just a moment and replied, “Well, I used to know.”

Actually, a cubit is a little short of two feet. This would make the ark over 450 feet long—the size of one and one-half football fields. That is a large vessel indeed. No wonder it took Noah 120 years to construct it. And it was built miles from the sea. Noah’s neighbors had a good laugh about that.

Noah, of course, had the last laugh. The rains came. The waters rose. There was destruction over all the earth. Only Noah, his family and the animals, two of every living species on the earth, were spared. For a year they lived in that great Ark until finally the earth was dry and the Lord told Noah to go forth to repopulate the land. A rainbow appeared in the heavens and God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.” (Gen. 9:12-15)

The story of Noah and the great flood is one of the best known and best loved stories in the Scripture. It is also one of the most important because it represents the beginning of the concept of a covenant relationship between the Creator and his creation.

We are a covenant people. As descendants of Noah we share in the benefits of this relationship which God has established with his children. What are some of the implications of this covenant relationship? What does it mean to our lives today? There are two implications that glare at us.

The first implication sounds a little negative, but I hope you will give it serious thought. Here it is: God is disappointed—even in the best of us.  I hope that doesn’t burst your bubble. It is a central truth of Scripture. God is disappointed even in the best of us.  The funny thing is that some of us don’t look at it that way at all. We believe that God is fortunate to have us on His side.  We refuse to see that even the best of us is a mixture of dust and divinity.

Former Beatle Paul McCartney once coined a word to describe the letdown fans experience “when a new song by an old group fails to make them feel young again.” The word is anticipointment. “Anticipointment,” he says, “is the feeling of disappointment you get when you’re expecting something really great, but you get something entirely different.” (2)

I don’t think God suffered from anticipointment when He saw what Noah did. God knew what He was getting into when He created human beings. God made us in His image, but out of His love for us, He gave us the free will to choose our own path. And too often, we choose to put our own needs first.

In a speech made in 1863, Abraham Lincoln said, “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. . . Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.” (3)

In other words, there is a battle within the human heart. None of us is immune. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3: 23)

This sad truth presents a dilemma for our Creator. He made us from the clay of the earth, fashioned us in His own image, breathed into us the breath of life, gave us the ability to love, to desire, to will. More significantly he endowed us with the most precious gift of all, the freedom to choose. Unfortunately, sometimes we choose wrongly. Every one of us. Call it original sin if you wish. There is a basic flaw within our character.

At times, God is disappointed even in the best of us. The story of Noah and the flood is the culmination of that disappointment. According to the Genesis writer, God repented that he had ever made man. There is an irony in the story of Noah, however. God was so disappointed in humanity that he decided to wipe the slate clean and start all over. He sent the great flood to destroy all life on the earth. Except he decided to save a remnant: Noah and his family and two of every kind of animal on the earth. Why did God choose to save Noah? He was the only righteous man left in the world. But notice. After the waters subsided, and he leaves the ark, what does Noah do? He falls into a tawdry sin that would have brought God’s wrath under other circumstances. God chooses the only righteous man on earth and he turns out to be not very righteous at all. Noah’s story is our story.

Even at our best, we are not all God created us to be. That is why one of the words in the scripture for sin is *hamartia*, missing the mark.  None of us utilizes all of our potential, all of our ability, all of our talent in a constructive manner all the days of our life. We are not the mothers we ought to be, the fathers we ought to be, the citizens we ought to be, the church member we ought to be, the minister we ought to be, the soldiers of Christ we ought to be. We all fall short of the mark.  God is disappointed even in the best of us.

What does God do with His children in the light of the fact that we all fall short, we all miss the mark?  We all have a little bit of rebellion within our soul.

What is God to do?  It didn’t work for Him to destroy humanity and start over as he did with Noah.  He knew that it would not be long until humanity slipped back into the slime again.  What is He to do?

For you see, God has another problem. It can be stated like this. Though God is disappointed even in the best of us, He is hopelessly, passionately, in love even with the worst of us. Think about that for a moment. Though God is disappointed even in the best of us, He is hopelessly, passionately, in love even with the worst of us.

At the age of 18, a young German man was drafted into Hitler’s army. He was eventually taken captive by Allied soldiers and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Scotland. There, for the first time, he saw pictures of the concentration camps run by the Nazis. His eyes were suddenly opened. He saw undeniable proof of the overwhelming evil of Hitler and the Nazi regime he had been supporting. And, as a result, he experienced terrible shame and self-hatred and depression.

Then a visiting chaplain gave the young soldier a Bible, and he read about a God who loves us so much that he sent His Son, Jesus, to die on a cross to take away our sins. In 1947, the young German was invited to attend a Christian conference where he received love and forgiveness from Dutch Christians who had survived Nazi concentration camps during World War II. This young man was so inspired by the forgiveness he received from these believers that he became a Christian. This young man, Jürgen Moltmann, went on to become one of the most influential Christian theologians of the 20th century, writing books that influenced a generation of pastors. He was particularly known for his theology of hope.

In one of his books, Moltmann wrote, “But the ultimate reason for our hope is not to be found . . . in what we want, wish for and wait for; the ultimate reason is that we are wanted and wished for and waited for. . . God is our last hope because we are God’s first love.” (4)

Think about that for a minute. “God is our last hope because we are God’s first love.” God, the Creator of all life . . . The Source of all that is Good . . . The very definition of Good . . . God loves us. God created us in His image. God breathed His life into us. God made us to be the special focus of His love. And that was only the beginning of God’s plan for us.

That is the other horn of the dilemma.  God is disappointed in the best of us, but he is hopelessly, passionately in love even with the worst of us.

This dilemma forces God into an unusual role.

Actually, God’s last word concerning this dilemma is not found in the story of Noah or even in the Old Testament. It is found in the Gospels. Indeed, it is the Gospel.      Here’s what God did—He made a Covenant with us.  He did that first with a rainbow and later with a cross. This past week we celebrated Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the beginning of the Lenten season. This is the time when we prepare to face the cross and Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. There is a story that I think is particularly relevant for us at this time of year.

Major Barbara Sherer served as a military chaplain in Kuwait. She wrote about the time a fire swept through her camp one day, destroying the tents the troops were using as a dining hall and a chapel. Amazingly, the fire started right after breakfast in between the times for the Protestant and Catholic services. No one was in the tents during this time, so there were no fatalities. The fire also happened just a few days before Ash Wednesday. Major Sherer decided that instead of burning palm fronds and collecting their ashes for the Ash Wednesday service as she normally did, she would use some of the ashes from the burned military tents to anoint the foreheads of the soldiers.

After the fire cooled down, Major Sherer got permission to visit the site to collect some ashes. A firefighter scooped up a cupful and put it in a plastic bag and gave it to her. Later, as she was pouring the ashes into a bowl for the service, she spotted something shiny in the bag. It was a small silver cross that had survived the fire. On it were inscribed the words “Jesus is Lord.” The fire had burned through five very large tents. Everything in the path of the fire had been destroyed. How had the firefighter, in scooping up a random cup of ashes, managed to pick the exact spot where this tiny cross lay hidden?

Major Sherer writes, “The message to me is clear: God walks with us through the terrible firestorms of our lives, and we are lifted unharmed out of the ashes. We may be marked in some way, like the cross of ash placed on our foreheads during Ash Wednesday. However, that mark is a symbol of God’s love and protection.” (5)

Remember that the next time you see a rainbow in the heavens, will you? God’s plan to save the world started before God ever created it. He sealed his promise with a rainbow. Then made good on the promise with a cross. None of us are all we might be.  But still Somebody loves us and He sent His Son to die for us. That’s the Gospel.  A Father willing to welcome home a disobedient child.  A Father willing to take that child’s place on the cross of Calvary.

1. Matt Woodley, managing editor, PreachingToday.com; sources: Oliver Burkeman, *The Antidote* (Faber and Faber, Inc., 2012), pp. 151-154; Matt Symonds, “Why MBAs, and B-Schools Need to Embrace Failure,” *Bloomberg* (7-2-12).

http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/december/6121012.html.

2. With Adam Hanft, *Dictionary of the Future* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), p. 158.

3. Contributed. Source unknown.

4. Moltmann’s writings. Quotes from *The Source of Life*. *The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life.* Fortress Press 1977. https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/witness/.

5. “Out of the Ashes” by Carlos Wilton. Published on Beliefnet.com, 3/29/03. “Hope from the Ashes” by Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger. http://www.presbyterianwarren.com/hopeashes.html.

ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Dynamic Preaching First Quarter Sermons, by King Duncan

3

Last April a 9-year-old African-American lad named Willie was kidnapped from his driveway in Atlanta, Georgia. After the man grabbed him, Willie explained later, and threw him in the back of his car, Willie just kept “praising God” with a song he learned in Sunday school. It was a song by Hezekiah Walker titled “Every Praise.”

While he was singing, Willie said, his kidnapper yelled expletives at him.

“He told me, shut up you [blankety-blank] boy,” said Willie. Willie, however, kept singing until his kidnapper got tired of it and threw him out of the car. The kidnapper ordered Willie not to reveal what happened.

Willie’s mother said she realized what had happened to her son after he called her from a phone belonging to a woman who lived near the spot where Willie was thrown out. His mother broke down in tears because she remembered God’s promise to her to never leave her nor forsake her. She believed God definitely lived up to His promise in bringing back her son to her unharmed. She’s a very fortunate mother.

God does live up to His promises though not usually as dramatically as He did for Willie and his mother.

Today we want to look at the promise God made to Noah and, indeed, to all humankind. It is one of the best known stories in all of literature. And recently it was made into a major motion picture which some of you undoubtedly saw.

In the time of Noah, the whole human race had become wicked, their hearts had waxed cold. The Lord’s heart was deeply troubled. He regretted creating human beings. So God said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground for I regret that I have made them.” Let’s pause here for a moment. This is not a comfortable story for Christians. How could a loving God destroy all human beings, except for one man and his family?

I read recently a true story about a couple who enrolled their little girl in a private Christian school. They were so excited about their daughter going to this school that taught positive values. One day when the daughter came home from school, the parents asked her, “What did you learn in school today?”

When the little girl told them the story of Noah and the Ark about how God destroyed everyone except for Noah and his family the parents were outraged. They could not believe that their little girl had been exposed to such an awful story. They were so outraged that they withdrew their little girl from the school with this parting comment, “Our God wouldn’t do that.”

If we are honest with ourselves, says pastor John Bugg, that is not a surprising response to the story of Noah and the Ark. The story of Noah is truly disturbing. (1)

God sends a great flood. Have you ever been caught in a flood? It’s a terrible thing. Water can be amazingly destructive. Bridges wash out, homes fall and then are carried away. You’re on the road . . . you come to a place where water covers the road . . . it looks like perhaps the water will only come up to your hubcaps. So you drive on through. But it’s deeper than you think. Your car stalls out and suddenly you discover that you are at the mercy of the water. Over the years that is a scenario that has played out many times in almost every flood situation sometimes with tragic results.

Imagine that same situation, only this time there is no escape. There is no high ground to move to. You and all your family are going to drown. God is doing a system reboot and starting all over. Only one family in all the world will be left. It is a tragic story if you are not part of Noah’s family.

[By the way, if climate scientists are anywhere close to being right, we will probably see something akin to that scenario in low lying nations in the near future. Few people question anymore whether the snow cap covering the South Pole is melting. I won’t argue with you whether warming is caused by human activity. But what will it mean when oceans rise several feet? Obviously many millions of people will be displaced, particularly in poorer countries. How many will die? No one knows. But at least, there will be somewhere to run if neighboring

nations will even take them in. Considering our own response to immigrants fleeing oppression, that is questionable. In the biblical story, there was nowhere to run.]

Only one man and his family were spared in this holocaust by water. A man named Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Noah was a righteous man, the writer of Genesis tells us, blameless in the sight of the Lord. Does this mean that he was without sin? No, but it means that Noah at least tried to live in accordance with the Lord’s commands and this is why the Lord saw fit to save him and his family. God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out.”

God told Noah to build this enormous ark and to take into the ark all the animals and birds on earth, two by two. Most of us are thinking, what a mess. Aren’t you glad you weren’t Mrs. Noah? Who was going to clean the ark in those semi-enlightened times? Probably not Noah. He was too busy fishing. It probably fell to his wife.

The earth was flooded for one hundred and fifty days and all that God said would happen did happen, says the writer. But God remembered His promise to Noah and the Ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. And when the earth was dry again God instructed Noah to come out of the ark. Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and he sacrificed burnt offerings. Then God made a covenant with humanity.

The covenant God made with Noah is our lesson for this first Sunday in Lent: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.”

This is not a comfortable story, but it contains a wonderful promise: God says, “Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.”

What exactly is a covenant? A covenant is an agreement, a contract, a pledge or a promise. When some of us think of a covenant today we might think of marriage. Marriage is one example of a sacred covenant. At least that is what it is intended to be. Sometimes it deteriorates into something else altogether. But here we see the Lord making this promise to Noah, without conditions.

It is interesting that this covenant is unilateral. God makes this covenant with no input from Noah. He doesn’t say, “If humankind does this or if humankind does that.” Nothing humankind can do will affect this covenant. Never again will God destroy the world by water. Period. Exclamation point.

In the delightfully anthropomorphic way in which the Bible is written, God says, “Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant . . .”

So the rainbow is there not to remind us, but to remind God of His promise, as if God might be tempted to forget. Let’s talk for a moment about promises.

Dr. Wayne Dyer, wrote a book, along with his wife, Marcelene, called *A Promise Is a Promise*. It is the true story of a mother who has cared for her comatose daughter for over twenty-eight years, feeding her every two hours around the clock, turning her, giving her insulin every four hours, raising the money to pay all expenses, and sleeping in a chair every night next to her daughter’s side.

Twenty-eight years ago, Edwarda, then sixteen years old, pleaded, “You won’t leave me will you, Mommy?” as she was slipping into a diabetic coma.

Kaye, her mother, responded, “I will never leave you, darling, I promise. And a promise is a promise.”

In the ensuing twenty-eight years Edwarda O’Bara has moved from a stage one coma wherein she was catatonic and had to have her eyes taped shut, to a stage nine, where she appears to recognize voices, smiles, and cries when saddened. She voluntarily closes her eyes and sometimes appears to react to stimuli in the room.

But the most amazing part of this story concerns the effect that Edwarda has on those who have visited her. Some claim to have experienced miraculous healings, and everyone feels the unconditional love Edwarda radiates from her immobile body. (2)

We are all inspired when someone keeps a promise against uncompromising odds. Promises are sometimes difficult to keep. The late comedian Phil Silvers, who some of us may remember as television’s beloved Sgt. Bilko, said that once his small daughter woke him up when he was taking a much-needed nap. He scolded her. “Didn’t you promise to be a good girl and not make any noise?”

She responded, “Yes, father.”
And he said harshly, “And didn’t I promise you a spanking if you weren’t a good girl.”

“Yes, daddy,” said his daughter softly. Then she added, “But since I’ve broken my promise, you don’t have to keep yours.”

Well, sometimes a promise of deserved punishment can be modified by mercy. And there are times when a promise may be broken if it’s the wrong kind of promise. Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances. Still we are inspired when anybody makes a promise and sticks by it.

Some of us are still inspired by the promise that the late actor Danny Thomas once made. It occurred during his early years in show business when he was suffering setback after setback. During one of his darkest moments, he was cornered in Detroit by a man who handed him a pamphlet telling about Jude, patron saint of the hopeless.

“When St. Jude does you a favor,” Danny Thomas explained, “you’re supposed to tell people about it, spread his name, and carry pamphlets,” Then he added, “I’m sure this is a legend, even fiction, but that’s how the tale goes.”

The setbacks continued. Finally, Danny went to church to pray for direction. Should he try another profession? Contrary to popular legend, he didn’t offer any deals to God. He merely prayed for the ability to take care of his family. But when success came, he felt a sense of obligation to give back for the good fortune he had received. And the result was St. Jude’s Medical Center for Children in Memphis, a center that has performed many miracles. Over many years Danny Thomas served not only as its founder, but also as its chief fund raiser, and number-one flag waver.

One of my favorite stories about the result of the covenant Danny Thomas made with the children of St. Jude’s concerns the year he was able to delete Christmas from the St. Jude’s calendar. It seems that the St. Jude staff used to celebrate Christmas in December and also in July because many of the terminally ill youngsters couldn’t survive until the traditional date. But the work at St. Jude’s resulted in adding months and then years to the children’s lives and the time came when they could delete Christmas in July. It was no longer needed. (3)

The power of a promise. Some of you know about the power of a promise kept. You saw it in your parents’ marriage. You’ve seen it in your own spouse. You’ve seen it in the faithfulness of good friends. Some of you have experienced it in those dark hours when you most needed God’s power and you discovered God was there. God is a promise keeper. Willie’s mother was right when Willie was returned to her unharmed. God keeps His

promises. And He doesn’t need a rainbow to remind Him of His promise: “I will never forget you nor forsake you. I am Abba, Daddy, and I love you more than any earthly parent ever could.”

That is what the cross is all about. The rainbow may be a reminder to God, but the cross is the reminder to us that God so loved the world that He gave His son for us.

Prolific author Lewis Smedes once wrote something that ought to be engraved on every Christian’s heart. It goes like this: “Somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God. “What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty. When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future.” (4)

What are the promises you have made in your life? Have you kept them? If you haven’t God’s grace is sufficient for you. That is His promise and that promise will never fail. But I hope you are working on being a promise- keeper, just as God is a promise-keeper. I guarantee you that if you will, the world will be better for it.

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1. http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/how-could-a-loving-god-destroy-the-world-john-bugg-sermon-on- god-the-father-36513.asp?Page=2.

2. Wayne W. Dyer, *Wisdom of the Ages* (New York: Quill, 1998).
3. Robert A. Schuller, *The World’s Greatest Comebacks* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), pp. 77-

78.
4. Tom Long, Editor, *A Chorus of Witnesses* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

4 *This material is used with permission of its author, Rev. Msgr. Joseph A. Pellegrino, Diocese of St. Petersburg, FL*

Lent begins this year with a reading from the Noah section of *Genesis*.  If you wish to read the complete story in *Genesis*, you will find it from chapters six through nine.  The Noah story begins with a notice of the depravity of the people. “When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved.”  Some translations use this phrase, “God was sickened by the sins of man.”  Many times we come upon some real low stuff, on TV, in the movies, on the web, and we use the phrase, “That disgusts me.”  All of us are sickened by sin.  God was disgusted.

            Even still, the goodness of one man, Noah, kept God from destroying mankind.  He protected Noah’s family and his creation from the flood.  Mankind would eventual reach salvation through water, the water of baptism.  Then at the end of the story, to demonstrate that he would never destroy man again, God sets his bow in the sky.

            Now, when we modern people think of a rainbow, we think of the colors.  The colors were not the focus of the ancient people.  Their focus was on the bow itself.  They saw the bow as God’s bow and arrows.  Remember, many of the ancients thought that storms and lightning were caused by various god’s losing their temper with a human and throwing thunderbolts and lightning at them.  The Greeks often depicted Zeus as hurling thunderbolts.  In the Noah story, the ancient Hebrews considered God as not throwing thunderbolts, but shooting them with his bow and arrow.  But, now, after the flood, God hangs up his bow. He is not going to use it again.  He sets his bow in the sky. Think of hitting a nail into the side of a wooden cabin and hanging the bow there.  The main point is that God will not give up on man. This is the covenant with Noah and us.  God will not give up on us.

            And we can’t give up on ourselves.  That is the real problem: very often we give up on ourselves.  We have fallen in the past, and we convince ourselves that we do not have the power to fight off sin when temptation shows up. There is a pop psychology that says, basically, we do not have to take responsibility for our actions.  So, a person says, "I may do this action which itself is evil, but my action is a result of forces beyond my control, rooted in my background, or in my genes.  I do not have to take responsibility for my actions.  Therefore I don't have to put up the fight to avoid the sin I'm tempted to commit."  Closely aligned to this way of thinking is the concept that since we don't have to take responsibility for our actions, then forgiving ourselves is all that is necessary when we have done something wrong.  We have to forgive ourselves, true, but we have to take responsibility for what we do and seek forgiveness from others and, ultimately, from God.

            The question arises, though, "In the face of temptation, are we powerless?"  If a person allows himself or herself to be exposed to an intense temptation, then his or her ability to withstand it is greatly reduced.  For example, an alcoholic is tempted to drink every day of his or her life, even if it has been years since he or she had a drink.  But if that person is alone on a business trip, is lonely, and goes to a bar, the temptation may be far more than the person can withstand.  The person, though, is not powerless because the person can choose not to go to that bar.

            Although we have the power to withstand temptation, the greatest source of our power is not within us as much as it is in the strength we receive from the Lord.  People who fight off temptations do so due to the power of God.  "I will set my bow in the sky as a sign of the covenant between you and me."  God promised Noah and us that he will never give up on us.  He loves us too much to give us up.  No matter what our particular temptation in life is, we can withstand it as long as we face up to it with the Lord.  We have to take responsibility for our actions.  We have to recognize that we can do evil and we can hurt others.  We have to pray continually.  Perhaps we have to pray: "Lord, I don't want to do this.  I don't want to be this way.  Lord, help me."  The rainbow, the sign given to Noah, is God's promise that he knows our weaknesses but will never let us go.

            Although we are tempted continually, and although we may have failed in the past, we have no right to give up on ourselves.  We have no right to beat our personalities into submission and consider ourselves unfit to do the right thing.  No matter what mistakes we may have made, God still is there trying to keep us from falling into the same hole the third, fourth or fifth time, or seventy-seventh time.  If God refuses to give up on us, then what right do we have to give up on ourselves?

            Jesus was out in the desert with the wild beasts.  And angels ministered to him.  During Lent we reflect on what the wild beasts are in our lives.  What are the particular things that devour our spiritual life?  With the help of the angels, with God's love we can and will fight them off.  True, we have to want to fight.  We have to want to change for the better.  That is what Lent is all about: spending forty days putting up the fight, fighting off the beasts, preparing to announce the Kingdom.  We can do it.  If we reflect on how easy it is for us to slip into our old habits, and have that negative thought that we have no chance of changing, then we have only to look at the rainbow and know that God will never give up on us.  We can change.  We must change.  His mission for us demands it.  His love for us makes it possible.

             Today we pray that this Lent we allow God to work his wonders in us as we struggle against those elements of our lives that would keep us from fulfilling God's mission for us.

            Look at the rainbow.  God has not given up on us.  We cannot give up on ourselves.