

Sermon for Feb 21, 2021 First Sunday in Lent by Pastor Hanberry

Theme: The Blessings of Lent

Gen 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15 Matt 5:1-3 Ser 21-8

Sermon: The Blessing of the Kingdom of Heaven (“Noah’s ‘Goal’ at the End of the Rainbow”)

As you can tell from my time with the children, I am intrigued by the image of the rainbow and the cross together. We all love rainbows. After a rainstorm, a bow brings us out of our houses and offices into the open to see the red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet: Colors of the spectrum – always in the same array, in the same order. And we almost always search for the place where it touches the earth—that’s where the pot of gold is located, right? Or maybe it suggests what the coming kingdom of Heaven looks like. Or the way God wants the world to look like.

And whether we know the story or not know the story in the book of Genesis about God’s promise of the rainbow—everyone sees the rainbow as a hopeful sign in the sky. There is something about it that gives us hope, that restores.

For Christians, the image of the cross (and yes, sometimes we see three of them standing on a hill as we travel) is a hopeful sign as well. (unfortunately, the Christian church has forgotten there were 3 crosses on the hill called Golgotha. Jesus was not alone on the center cross...he was connected with one of the men on one of the crosses—Jesus reaching out to him to forgive him and save him. In the cross we are reminded of God’s saving action—we are reminded of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection—the sign of the living, Post-Easter Jesus.

Even if someone is not a Christian, when they see a cross on a church or on a hillside or around someone’s neck, they would know the cross to be a sign of God’s promise of transforming love, of God’s redemptive power.

So, my friends, the rainbow and the cross are powerful images that remind us of God’s ultimate promise: There is no evil, there is no tragedy great enough to defeat the purposes and promises of God for our lives. The badness of this world, of our lives, can never ultimately overwhelm God’s goodness for our lives.

That just may be God’s “goal” at the end of the rainbow. That just may be the ultimate gift of the Jesus on the cross. ► Noah and his family and all God’s creatures come out of the ark transformed. Transformed and full of hope because God’s promise is to provide the means to beginning again. God’s covenant promise is to restore the creation---to restore humankind and all the rest of creation.

► It is very tempting to focus solely on the beauty of the rainbow and ultimate significance of the cross. That would keep all this within our normal comfort zones. It is tempting to idealize even the temptation experiences of Jesus in the wilderness like you might see in a great Hollywood epic movie. But since it is my job as the preacher to sometimes afflict the comfortable, we need to get real here for a moment. We need to look more deeply at the truth of these stories in our two lessons this morning.

The rainbow only comes after the “flood – a death-dealing flood.”-- A flood that was caused by what we might describe as **God’s good creation gone bad**. God’s good creation gone bad by human greed, violence, and the sin of trying to be God. ► Before the flood, we can see the blood-shed and greed of the people.

► Before the rainbow, we can hear the wind and feel the power of the water as it surges over all the land, as it wipes out the degradation. And we can see the faces and feel the horrible agony of God’s creation (humans and animals) drowning in the flood. We’ve seen those same images in various times and places in recent years: ► California’s devastating wildfires last year followed by recent flooding; ► hurricanes and the awful tornados in Missouri, Ark., Texas, Alabama; ► in the Gulf Coast of the US, and in Nicaragua, in Honduras. How can we read the text in Genesis without thinking of the lost of life in the flooding of the Houston area? We can’t. We ought not to.

I agree with one writer who says, “the floods on the Gulf Coast are different from the flood in Genesis. The floods in the south came from natural disaster, hurricanes, whereas the great flood in the time of Noah was God’s response to human sin.” Further, I would agree with this writer that “no theologically intelligent person would think that God sent the hurricanes to the Gulf Coast to wipe out sin.” And I would add that if that were the case the whole of the US would still be under water.

We might change all that I just said to include the Pandemic. One of my doctors tells me every time I see him that Covid 19 is God’s punishment for our sin, for our complicity with the hatred toward each other, personal and global. No, indeed, this is not about punishment, especially after God sends out the rainbow and Jesus comes down from the cross to be resurrected.

With all these reflections on Noah’s rainbow and the significance of the Cross, let’s look at the Beatitude Robert read for us: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.” From the material from Amy-Jill Levine, subtitled, “A beginner’s guide to the Kingdom of Heaven., listen to what AJ, as she likes to be called, says the “poor in spirit” is not about weakness, much less weakness in faith.” She says, “poor in spirit,” is in part a

synonym for the people who have enough humility that they do not operate from a sense of pride: the poor in spirit are those who recognize that they are both the beneficiaries of the help of others and part of a system in which they are to pay it forward and help those whom they can.”

Another way to think of the poor in spirit is that they recognize the gap between what we have and what we should have. For instance, we have cash in the bank, but we may not have compassion, generosity, or love.

I think it could be said that God, yearning for hope, discovered Noah and Noah gave God hope. Noah was poor in Spirit. He was a good man with a good and loving family. God must have seen something in Noah that gave God hope, and so God set out a plan that would restore creation.

Given all that has happened to us, to people all over this country and the world in the last year wouldn't we like to start over sometimes soon. To wipe out the past and do it all over again – in a different way. That's not usually possible but we can gain new inspiration and new and fresh ideas for renewing our lives, to making the future a good future. It's a good thing we can't wipe away the past and do it over. Thank God there are no do-overs. We have learned a great deal about living and worshipping loving. Let's allow all that enrich our future and become a blessing to us, as we are a blessing to others.

God's covenant promises are offered to us again today as a universal, unilateral, unconditional Blessing. A gift of hope. A reminder that God's love is always greater than the world's wrong. God's rainbow will always overwhelm the storms of life. God's promise is and will always be our hope.

Let us remember that the poor in spirit are those who are aware of their own privileges and blessing and because they are ware, work to be a blessing to others who do not have the same benefits.

This is what the kingdom of Heaven looks like... May we all be a part of making it come in our time. Amen.