

“ARKS AND ARCHES”

Series: “Promises, Promises”

The First Sunday of Lent – B
February 22, 2015

Peace Lutheran
Grass Valley, CA

TODAY’S FUNNY:

Before they were to attend the cousin’s high school graduation the pastor, knowing how fidgety both of his children could get, thought he’d prepare them for the event. “Graduations are sometimes long and boring,” he said. “I want you two to behave and not constantly ask when it is going to be over.” Don’t worry, Dad. We’ll live,” the daughter replied. “We last through your sermons, don’t we?”

TEACHING POINTS FROM THE MESSAGE:

1. The country preacher, “Some things are hard to believe.”
2. The rainbow is a sign of promise, a covenant/contract in Bible language.
3. Two sides of the contract: Noah’s is the Ark, God’s is to save.
4. The rainbow is not only a sign of the promise, it is a sign of God’s faithfulness.
5. The rainbow is the shining face of God’s overwhelming love and mercy.

THE MESSAGE:

The story is that a country preacher announced that his sermon the next Sunday would be on Noah and the Ark. He provided the Scripture reference ahead of time so people might prepare. A couple of youngsters noticed a quirk in the story’s page layout in the church’s Bibles so they slipped into the sanctuary during the week and glued two pages of the pulpit Bible together.

Sunday came. The preacher opened the Bible. “Noah took himself a wife,” he began, “and she was...” He turned the page to continue, “...300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high.”

The preacher paused for a moment with a quizzical look on his face. Slowly he turned the page back and read it silently then turned the page and continued reading. Then he looked up at the congregation and said, “I’ve been reading this old Bible for nigh on to 50 years and there are some things that are still hard to believe.”

There are some things that are hard to believe. Perhaps the rainbow is one of them. It is hard to grasp how the confluence of the sunlight, the observer’s eye and the prisms of raindrops can so perfectly align to form the perfect arc of color. It is even more dramatic in that the rainbow appears against the background of dark stormy sky as the storm gives way to the clearing skies. The colors of the spectrum are always perfectly refracted -- violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red.

There is something about a rainbow that captures our attention, and amazes us. Rainbows, such perfect colorful phenomenon, are impossible for human hands to duplicate.

It is no wonder that ancient people saw the rainbow as the hand of God, a symbol of a divine promise. No wonder that it is still hard to believe -- that God once destroyed this world with a flood, and afterwards promised that this creation was too wonderful to ever be destroyed in that manner again. It is God's rainbow promise!!

The rainbow is the sign of a promise. It is a "covenant", an agreement or a contract (they are all the same). Like modern day contracts, there are two sides with each having a responsibility in order for it to work. Each side keeps their part of the agreement.

In this case, God's side was to save. Noah's side was the ark. God's side was to provide a way for humanity to come back to God through the faithfulness of Noah and his descendants. Noah's side was to be faithful enough to construct an ark -- a 4 1/2 storied vessel 1 1/2 blocks long and 75' wide -- that's another story!!

Let's retrace what got God and Noah there in the first place.

People kept ignoring God and leaving God out of their lives. People kept ignoring the wonder of God's creation and the promise given as Adam and Eve exited the garden, the promise that God would provide even though it would be as a result of the toil and labor. God was keeping that side of the promise -- the legal result of sin was death.

But God wanted more than that for humanity. God was longing for a deeper relationship and a closer walk with His people.

So Noah was enlisted to be the agent of a new agreement, a fresh start. Because of Noah's faithfulness, God came to save him and his family (8 people in all) -- and all the animals, birds and insects -- to become the start of a whole new era. This whole thing was redemption and salvation for a sin-filled world.

All Noah had to do was provide the means, an ark, built to God's specifications and filled with animals, birds and insects as God commanded. The ark became the vessel of salvation and God's protection, while rain poured down for 40 days and 40 nights.

Turns out this promise keeping wasn't easy. Not for God nor for Noah.

But, Noah kept his side of the deal. And God kept up his side of the agreement. The world was destroyed. Life was saved. And God sealed the deal with the rainbow.

When we see a rainbow, we are apt to exclaim, "Look!! A rainbow!!" But a rainbow is something more. It is a promise. It is the sign of a covenant, a new agreement, a sign of God's love and promise to never, ever again destroy the world with a flood.

It was and is to be a sign of God's promise of hope, of God's faithfulness to God's promises. It is to be a sign of hopeful new beginnings, the promise that in the end God has the power to save and redeem and make new. It seals one end in all of history to the tragedy of sin and its consequence, death.

This discussion actually occurred between a banker and his customer in Texas. The farmer came in and told the banker he had good news and bad news. The banker asked to hear the bad news first.

The Farmer said, "You know the crop loan I've taken out from you every year the last ten years?"

The banker said, "Well, yes."

The Farmer continued, "Well, this year I can't pay it back. And you know the mortgage I have on the land?"

Well, yes!"

"I can't pay it back either. And the couple of hundred thousand I still have outstanding on my equipment?"

"Yes." said the banker.

"They're all yours!! You can have them all back!"

There was a moment of silence. Then the banker said, "So, then, what's the good news?"

The farmer smiled, "I plan to keep banking with you."

God's rainbow promise is as unbelievable as that. God has promised to keep banking on the human race. From the earliest of times, in spite of ourselves, in spite of our sin, our short-comings, our failures. In spite of our un-conquerable debt to sin.

You see, God's rainbow promise is much more than God waving a white flag of a truce. It is God saying, "Sometimes you make me sorrowful, sometimes you make me tremble with anger, and sometimes you please me. And although I cannot ignore your wrong like some senile grandfather, I have decided that only my love will overrule it in such a way that you will always believe. Therefore, while I won't let you off the hook, I'll never let you go."

You see, what we get in the promises of God, especially in the redemption given in Jesus Christ, God keeps his promise. As unbelievable as it is, it truth, pure and simple. God is faithful. This is truth as pure as the bow that appears in the sky after the showers of God's providence and love.

So, the good news for us is that that we are not abandoned to our own devices to sink into the oblivion of sin. The good news is that the despair of the flood, and of sin, does not have the last word. The good news is that the one who sent the flood-waters drew them back again. The one who sent death renewed it into life. There is not only a deluge, there is a rainbow carrying God's promise to give life, even through another death, the one of Jesus on the cross. To give a new sign of the overwhelming love and mercy of God.

The rainbow, then, becomes the shining face of God's promise.

A prayer:

I saw a rainbow last week, Lord.
It was red and orange and yellow
and green and blue and violet.
It followed the rain that watered your land.
The rain filled up wadis and streambeds.
It refreshed reservoirs.

It was a blessing that transcended borders
where men and women stared at each other
through binoculars.

Not trusting.
Not sharing.
Not living.

The water that came brought life.
And it took life away.

It greened the hills and pastures.
And it killed people caught in the flood torrents.

Your water, O God, gives life
And death.
And in its wake leaves a rainbow
as a sign that you are there.

I saw a rainbow last week
And in the rainbow
I saw the face of you, O God.
David Shearman, Blackstock, Ontario

In God's promises, may we see the face of God!!

Amen!!