

The Old Testament readings for Lent are a series of texts that concern covenant. In the Bible, covenant refers to the Lord's agreement and promisory way of establishing a relationship between God and people. The terms of the covenant are established by God. They reflect Israel's understanding about God's nature and will. The spiritual dynamics of the covenantal relationship include fidelity, mutuality and obedience.

The reading from Genesis 9:8-17 today is an oracle in God's mouth, a decree about God's intention. The oracular text is situated just at the end of the Flood narrative, when Noah and his family have been rescued from destruction by the faithful sovereignty of God. Biblical scholars think that the text was written in the sixth century B.C. when the life of Israel was disrupted (but not destroyed) by exile. In the oracle, God's initial utterance, "As for me . . . " focuses intensely on God's person and God's resolve to establish (qum---raise up---cut) a covenant. This covenant in Genesis is dramatically distinctive in several ways: . . . It is made between God and all future generations. . . It is made not only with human beings but also with all creatures of the earth. . . And, most dramatic of all only, one party to the agreement--God---speaks at all. The covenant with Noah . . . is an act of a free and gracious God in behalf of a world that did not have to ask for it or earn it or even respond to it. (Imaging the Text, year B Lent I by John Hayes)

In Isaiah 54:9-10 we find a similar unconditional pledge of steadfast love, peace and solidarity to the exiled community from which the Noah and the Flood story was written. To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. *In this promise, the community of Israel was made a safe place, just as the flood decree in Genesis made the world a safe place.*

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 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. 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. 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: 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: and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. God said to Noah, "this is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.

"God's Bow"

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Genesis 9:13

Like the Ash Wednesday trumpets that sounded God's call to return with repentant hearts to worship God, our church bell summoned us to worship God this morning. We left our home, work, family, friends, personal interests, leisure and rest to remember God's Sabbath and keep it holy. We are here, fasting from the idols we serve in the world to learn how we can better serve God. We are here, fasting from becoming all we can be so that we can better know, who God is. We are here, fasting from the passions of our hearts so that we will have room for Jesus to fill us with the

passion of his heart. We are here, fasting from the worldly powers that claim us . . . safely gathered at the heart of God and at the welcome table of Jesus . . . to be encouraged in Christ's way of being in the world but not of it.

Our encouragement this day comes from the Biblical Flood story about Noah and the Ark. It's the story in which God tells about the time the Creator promised God's Self to hold Almighty power against sinful creation and creatures in check. It's a complex story that deals with Israel's core faith affirmation---the Lord our God is One---and how the Holy One whose Almighty Nature consists of both positive and negative powers---disarmed the force of the destructive power used in the saving work of cleansing sin in creation and creatures. It's an inside story of God's resolve to never again let Holy Anger be translated into annihilation of the created order.

According to Israel's faith, God's unilateral promise to disarm was revealed to humans through the sign of the rainbow. *I have set my bow in the clouds, it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth ... When . . . the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my everlasting covenant . . . The sign that will witness to the reality of God's fidelity is the "bow." It likely refers to God's bow (and arrows) as a weapon of war, hostility, and destructiveness. That the bow is suspended in the sky*

means that God has made a gesture of disarmament, has hung up the primary weapon, and now has no intention of being an aggressor or adversary. This demobilized weapon of God is a gesture of peace and reconciliation. God intends to be at peace with God's world. (Texts for Preaching, p.192-193)

God's bow made the world safe. Not safe from the onslaught of another mother nature flood or tornado or free from a monster terrorist attack, but safe from God's destructive anger against their sin. God's bow redeemed the power of instinctual fear in quivering souls by disarming it's force with the greater power of trust in the Lord. God's bow of trust caused Carmen Bernos De Gasztoid, to pray from Noah's perspective with these words: Lord, what a menagerie! Between Your downpour and these animal cries one cannot hear oneself think! The days are long, Lord, All this water makes my heart sink. When will the ground cease to rock under my feet? The days are long. Master Raven has not come back. Here is Your dove. Will she find us twig of hope? The days are long, Lord. Guide Your Ark to safety, some zenith of rest, where we can escape at last from this brute slavery. The days are long, Lord, Lead me until I reach the shore of Your covenant. Amen. God's Bow made the world safe. But for those of us who struggle with trusting in rainbow faith, we respond to it with faith like that of little Tommy . . . Who *one day was playing his favorite game of riding his*

mother's broom around the yard like a horse. When it started to get dark, Tommy went into the house, leaving the broom in the yard. In cleaning up after dinner, Tommy's mother asked the boy to bring in her broom. "But I'm scared to go out in the dark, Mama." Mother answered, "The Lord is out there, honey. Don't be afraid." So Tommy opened the back door a crack and called out, "Lord, if you're out there, hand me the broom!" (World's Collection, p. 146)

God's bow also made the world safe by negating humanity's sin of idolatry of human power. In commenting on the unilateral nature of God's Bow covenant, John Hayes wrote: *The covenant with Noah . . . Is an act of a free and gracious God in behalf of a world that did not have to ask for it or earn it or even respond to it.* What this means is that people of rainbow faith know that they cannot save themselves from the negative force within the life of God. We are saved by the grace of God's own promise to disarm. In Christian thought we say that we cannot earn our own salvation or our way into heaven. In Christian spirituality we are like *Brother Martin who died and went to heaven. He was met at the front gate by St. Peter, who let him know that he needed one hundred points to make it in the pearly gates. "You tell me all the good things you've done, and I'll give you points according to your deeds. When you reach one hundred, I'll swing open the gates."* "Okay," Ted reported, "I was head usher at First Baptist for fifty years." "That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's

worth two points.” “I was married to the same woman for almost sixty five years and never cheated on her.”

“Remarkable,” Peter declared, “here are three more points.” “Only three?” Ted frowned. ‘How about this? I started a soup kitchen in the inner city and worked in a homeless shelter.’ “Terrific, and here are two more points.” Ted’s eyes opened wide and he yelled, “Two points! At this rate the only way I’ll get into heaven is by the grace of God!” “Come on in!” (World’s Jokes, p. 248-249)

Lastly, God’s bow made the world safe for Jesus to enter into the world and into the hearts and minds of men. The wisdom story, Rooms to Rent? helps us imagine what the establishment of that safe sanctuary between the Holy and unholy was like. *God was walking the streets, looking for a home for God’s beloved son. God knocked on my door. Well, I suppose I could let him rent the little spare bedroom, I thought. God read my thoughts. ‘I was looking to buy,’ he said. ‘Oh, I don’t think I really want to sell,’ I replied. ‘I need the place for myself, you see. But you could use the back room. The rent’s quite low. Why don’t you come in and have a look?’ So God came in and looked around. ‘I like it,’ God said. ‘I’ll take it on your own terms.’ Once he was settled in, I began to wonder whether I’d been a bit mean. There he was, cooped up in that little spare bedroom. God must have been having similar thoughts because God was there again at my door. ‘Would you have any more space now, do you think?’ he asked gently. ‘Well, I’ve been thinking and, and I could offer your son an extra*

room to rent now.' 'Thank you,' said God. 'I'll take the extra room. Maybe you'll decide to give my son more room later on. Meanwhile, I like what I see.' Time went on. I was still feeling a bit uneasy about this transaction. 'I'd like to give you some more room,' I kept telling God, 'but you see, it's a bit difficult. I need some more space for me.' 'I understand,' God kept saying. 'I'll wait. I like what I see.' Eventually, I decided to offer God the whole of the top floor. God accepted gratefully, on behalf of his son. 'Well, I can spare it really,' I told God. 'I'd really like to let you have the whole house, but I'm not sure . . . ' 'I understand,' said God. 'I'll wait. I like what I see.' A bit more time went by and there was God again at my door. 'I just want you to know', he said, 'that I'm still very interested in buying your house. I wouldn't put you out. We'd work it out together. Your house would be mine and my son would live here.' 'Actually,' he added 'you'd have more space than ever before.' 'I really can't see how that could be true,' I replied, hesitating on the doorstep. 'I know,' said God. 'And to be honest, I can't really explain it. It's something you have to discover for yourself. It only happens if you let my son have the whole house.' 'A bit risky,' I said. 'Yes, but try me,' encouraged God. 'I'm not sure. I'll let you know,' 'I'll wait,' said God. 'I like what I see.' (source unknown).

When the flood ended, God set the Almighty bow in the sky, turned it upside down and said, "never again." It is the heavenly bow that still makes the world safe today. How does the Creature say thanks?