

7.14.24

Always Look for the Rainbow

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Genesis 9:12-17, Ezekiel 1:26-28a, Revelation 4:1-3

Last Sunday, I preached at The Temple in Ocean Park, Maine and one of the things that makes that memorable is that we still worship in similar conditions as the founders did back in the 1880's – they also had wooden benches and seats with no cushions and no air conditioning! I'm sure a few of you have been discussing the heat this past week. People love to talk about the weather. When it's cold folks talk about how they wish it were warmer. When it's hot and humid, people put on air conditioning and talk about how they wish it were cooler. Grocery stores keep the inside of the store cooler in the summer than it is outside in the winter. When it rains, folks complain the weather's miserable, and they can't do things outside. When it's sunny all the time, folks moan about their gardens drying up and their grass turning brown.

Here's another thing – have you noticed how local television news has changed over the years? Now the weather is the biggest part of the news. It often leads and is much longer than the sports segment, which has shrunk considerably. When it comes to the weather and storm warnings, for most of human history there was no radar, no weather satellites, no long-range predictions beyond the Farmer's Almanac. You could be out in your boat minding your own business with no clue a hurricane was coming. We have greater warning and protection from extreme weather than our ancestors, yet people seem to flip out at the slightest update. A meteorologist can say there's a chance of 3-6 inches of snow and there's a run on bread, milk, and toilet paper as if you might not be able to get out for two weeks.

Storms can be both awe inspiring and destructive. Think about some of the worst storms you've ever been in. I remember the blizzard we tried to drive home in from my mother's 60th birthday in Boston on January 8, 1996. I remember a time when Jill and I were driving to Cooperstown, New York and we encountered such a violent thunderstorm I was scared to go on and scared to stop. You couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you; the rain was so heavy accompanied by all kinds of lightning and thunder. By now some of you may be thinking, *"Is he getting to a sermon here or is this just a weather report?"* I'm getting there.

What's important to understand is that **storms are a part of life**; God made the world that way. We experience natural, physical storms like thunder, lightning, rain, floods, blizzards, hurricanes, and tornados, but also psychological, emotional, relational, financial, and spiritual storms as well. **Everyone experiences storms in life. None of us are spared or immune.** After a particularly damaging storm of any kind, there can be an exceedingly long process of "cleaning up and rebuilding." During that time faith, patience, hard work, resilience, prayer, generosity, compassion, and hope are good tools to use. **We can't control when or where a terrible storm may strike, but we can control how we respond to it.**

The first thing we need to do is mentally prepare ourselves so that we're not surprised by storms, we simply expect them as part of life. Some storms can even leave something beautiful behind. It can be cool to walk on the beach after a big storm and find a beautiful moon snail or a sand dollar, or in the winter to see what the landscape looks like after a big snowfall. One of the nice things that can accompany a thunderstorm is **a rainbow**. If you asked people who know a little about the Bible, *"Where in the Bible is a rainbow mentioned?"* Many folks would be able to identify the story of Noah in Genesis 9 which we heard earlier when after the storm and flood from 40 days and nights of rain was over a rainbow was seen in the clouds. However, some people don't know there are two other places a rainbow is mentioned in the Bible.

One is in the prophet **Ezekiel** and the other is in the Book of **Revelation**. In **Ezekiel 1:26-28a**, the prophet is trying to describe the indescribable after having a close encounter with the glory of the Lord. This is made clear by how many times he uses a variation of the phrase, *"something like, in appearance like, looked like."* Listen to what he said, *"And above the dome over their heads there was **something like a throne**, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was **something that seemed like a human form**.²⁷ Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendor all around.²⁸ **Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day**, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. **This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.**"*

In **Revelation 4:1-3** John states, “After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, *“Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”* ² At once I was in the spirit, and **there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!** ³ And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and **around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.**”

Today’s scriptures from **Genesis, Ezekiel, and Revelation** introduce us to **three people in the Bible who saw rainbows**. **Noah** is the best-known story of the rainbow. Noah saw the rainbow **after** a storm. Think of all that Noah endured: building an ark and having to deal with ridicule and criticism from his neighbors and some possible zoning violations. Holding onto faith in midst of doubt, concern not just for himself and his family, but for all the living creatures. Day after day with all those animals to feed and clean up after, coping with the smell, trying to keep the carnivores from eating the other passengers, no Dramamine to help a queasy stomach, and wondering when the storm was going to end, and the waters would subside. During the long nights with the rain pelting down perhaps questioning if God had abandoned them or if God would deliver them. Some of us can relate to Noah and his family. You may be in a storm of some kind and you’re wondering if the Lord cares about you. You’re not sure how long this storm will last or how long you’ll have to endure and persevere. You may be struggling to maintain a positive attitude and to believe better days may yet be ahead or trying to figure out how to live and go on in a new reality.

The story of Noah and his family is reminder to trust God and hold on to hope that one day the storm will cease, and the waters will subside, and you’ll see a rainbow and know that God has been faithful to work out His purposes for you. That you will indeed have a future even though you may not be having an easy time believing that now. **Sometimes we don’t see the rainbow until after the storm has passed** and we experience a sense of relief and gratitude that it’s over. Some of you may feel like Noah and his family, and you’re thankful for having emerged from a storm.

Ezekiel was a priest and prophet during the time that God’s people were in exile in Babylon in the sixth century before Christ. The capture and destruction of Jerusalem was a decisive factor in Ezekiel’s ministry. As a prophet to the exiles who had been

taken from the land of Judah to Babylon, Ezekiel assured his hearers of the abiding presence of God among them. To a helpless and hopeless people Ezekiel brought hope of restoration to their homeland and temple by their just and holy God. Ezekiel saw a rainbow **in the storm** of defeat and exile. He has a vision of the Lord: ***“Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”*** That the glory of the Lord was with them even in exile gave hope to the people, encouraging them to persevere and keep the faith. The idea that the glory of the Lord was not limited to one place, the temple in Jerusalem, and was in fact with these poor, homeless, refugees who had been taken from their homes to a foreign country that had conquered them was an amazing insight and experience that Ezekiel shares with the people. God had not abandoned, forgotten, or forsaken them. God is present with them even in this time of sorrow, hardship, and defeat.

Some of us may be feeling like Ezekiel and the exiles. We may be grieving the death of a loved one as so many of the exiles were. We may have suffered other losses or defeats that have left us wondering if there’s any reason to keep on believing, trying, or working one more day. To tired, weary, worn down, worn out souls, Ezekiel says, even **in a storm**, the Lord is still with you. Hold on. Don’t give up.

Noah saw the rainbow **after the storm**, **Ezekiel saw a rainbow in the storm** of exile, and in **Revelation**, the final book in the Bible, **John** has a vision of heaven and in it **he sees a rainbow that’s a complete circle, not just a bow**. The rainbow John saw was **before the coming storm of persecution** under the Roman Emperor Domitian. The purpose of the Book of Revelation is to give hope to the church and Christians in crisis. The rainbow John saw was around the throne of God, and he describes a scene like what Ezekiel saw in his vision – they both saw someone they struggled to describe, seated on a throne. The Almighty was showing John what was going to take place to assure the people that God was not dead or unaware of what they were facing.

Sometimes in life storms come unexpectedly. Other times, like watching a summer thunderstorm approaching, we can see one moving our way. Sometimes it’s a doctor who tells us we have a storm coming. Sometimes it may be a family member. Sometimes it could be a friend. But someone can open their mouth to speak and as

soon as they share a few words, we know, there's a storm coming, so we better start preparing ourselves. Like John the revelator on the isle of Patmos and Christians in the late first century, we also need to be prepared that there may be storms coming our way that can take many different forms, even hostility, opposition, or persecution because of our faith in Christ as we talked about two weeks ago.

In the story of Noah, **the rainbow is a sign made by God for God**. The rainbow isn't a covenant that humanity has a responsibility to remember and carry out. We're the ones who benefit from the covenant God initiates. God says, whenever the rainbow appears, ***"I will remember my covenant between me and you."*** What's interesting is there isn't a word for "rainbow" in the Hebrew language. In Genesis, the Hebrew word just means "bow." It occurs over 70 times in the Hebrew Bible, most of which refer to bows, arrows, or archers. Some of the older English translations of the Bible, like the King James Version and newer updates of it like the NRSV, use "bow" in Genesis 9 rather than "rainbow." God is setting down God's bow in the clouds.

Not only that, but what shape do rainbows take? Think about how a rainbow looks when you see it in the sky. If it were an archer's bow, where would the arrow be pointing? It's not pointing towards the earth, but towards heaven. Not only is God laying down the weapon of destruction, but God is essentially saying, ***"I will take the destruction upon myself instead."*** This paints a picture of God laying down God's weapon against the world. God is disarming God's self.

We can see a connection to Jesus, who takes on all the destruction and harm of the world upon himself through the cross, establishing a "new covenant" (Luke 22:20) just as God in Genesis had promised in this old covenant. God made the rainbow as a symbol of nonviolence. It's a symbol of peace after a storm. It's a promise to handle things through a relationship of love, rather than through destruction.

Following Jesus doesn't mean our life will be easy without struggles, pains, adversity, challenges, or storms. Storms come to all of us. One of the great hymns of the church is *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. It was written by Thomas Chisholm who was born in a log cabin in Franklin, Kentucky, on July 29, 1866. After accepting Christ as his personal savior, he became the editor of a publication called the Pentecostal Herald. Later he was ordained to the Methodist ministry, but he resigned after a brief pastorate

because of poor health, and he became a life insurance agent. In a letter he wrote in 1941 when he was 75 years old, he shared, *“My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here **the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God** and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.”* **Thomas Chisholm spent much of his life in storms of poor health and poverty**, yet he wrote one of the best-known hymns about the faithfulness of God to care for us, provide for us, and watch over us through all the seasons, storms, and experiences of life.

Storms are a part of life, but there's something you can remember that makes a difference – **Always look for the rainbow**. I hope our sense of joy at seeing a rainbow in the sky is never diminished by the passing of time. On October 23, 2018, I was driving south on the expressway in Boston after a large thunderstorm was just passing. There was a lot of water on the road and as I looked to my left, I saw a rainbow, and then I realized there was a second one. Since I was in bumper to bumper barely moving traffic, I put my window all the way down and took a few photos with my phone. The only problem was, I forgot how much water was on the road. Like something out of a Seinfeld episode, right after I took the last of the photos, a car driving fast on the northbound side of the road sent a wall of water right at me that soaked me. I immediately started laughing because it was so comical. And I got my rainbow photos,

The poet William Wordsworth celebrated his delight at seeing a rainbow and his desire to never lose the sense of wonder and excitement he felt. He wrote:

“My heart leaps when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So it was when my life began;

So is it now that I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die”

We'll all experience storms until we're called home to heaven and all storms cease. Until then expect the storms and don't be afraid of them because God will be faithful even when there are questions, we cannot answer. Sometimes the Lord will

show you the rainbow after the storm like Noah, sometimes during the storm like Ezekiel, and sometimes before the storm like John. Always look for the rainbow that reminds us of the presence, glory, and faithfulness of God.

Blessing: Every time you see a rainbow, may you remember the faithfulness of God and the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. Always look for the rainbow.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What's a memorable experience you have of a storm? Where were you? What happened?
2. How do you think Noah and his family felt in the ark with the responsibility to care for all the creatures and to keep them and themselves alive during more than a month of rain?
3. What would it have meant to Noah and his family seeing the rainbow and hearing God share about the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature?
4. How does the assurance of knowing God is with you enable you to cope when you're in a storm like Ezekiel and the exiles in Babylon?
5. How does having a vision of heaven and an eternal perspective help us when we see a storm coming in our lives like John on the isle of Patmos?
6. How does looking for a rainbow help us remember God's presence and faithfulness whether we've come out of, are in, or heading toward a storm?

Genesis 9:12-17

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. ¹⁶ **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." ¹⁷ 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."