

Sermon

Sunday, September 23, 2018

Charleston, SC

8:00 am and 10:30 am Sanctuary Sermon ~ Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-13

Like A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

The Rev. Ted McNabb

A number of years ago in late spring just after I had retired from being rector of Christ Church, Mt. Pleasant I went to Nashville to visit my mother and stay with my sister who lives right off the Little Harpeth River, which was a rather small stream gently meandering through the bottom land in that part of Middle Tennessee. My niece, her husband, and her two small boys had come over for a visit when the rain started.

It was a heavy rain and it didn't stop. We soon saw the Harpeth waters rise at the bottom of the neighborhood and start to come out of its banks. I drove down to the historic site of Newsome's Station mill and with umbrella in hand leaned against the side of the old mill to see that the Harpeth had already risen to the bottom of mill's stonework. I looked at my watch and saw the waters were rising an inch every two minutes.

The rain continued heavy through the day and into the night. The houses nearest the river were caught and the flood crossed the street and moved up the hill into the next row of houses. The power had long gone out in the neighborhood and we found we were marooned. Newsome Station had become an ark as we waited for the flood waters to recede. There were many more such islands just such as ours around Nashville. It was three days before we could get out. Three days. No power, two little cooped-up boys and... three cats.

Today a week after hurricane Florence over 16 rivers are at flood stage in North and South Carolina and well over a 1000 roads are closed in North Carolina as the flood waters continue to head our way. In the surrounding area including here at St. Michael's we are finding ways to bridge the troubled waters and bring various kinds of aid to those who have been overwhelmed.

We know about storms here in the Low Country. My own introduction to the Low Country, having just moved from the Mississippi Delta thirty years ago in April, was Hurricane Hugo in September. I know how to use a chainsaw!

Here we live next to the Great Water...the ocean. Seventy percent of the earth is dominated by water. Ninety percent of this is ocean with rivers and rain taking the rest. In the midst of all this the human species stands on various continental islands of terra firma. We are not fish. We need a place to stand, secure footing to keep our head above water and breathe. But, living where we do, we know the real threat of storms whose immense power can drag chaos deep across the borders of security.

Deep watersbecause of their great power to overwhelm and because in them we cannot live, but only drown.....the deep waters that surround and lay siege to the secure places upon which humanity stands ... these waters have forever been the symbol for "sin" ... because sin is that thing the effect of which is to cause a deadly separation from life as the Bible defines it. Sin separates us, it maroons us. It is that deep ancient ocean of chaos that threatens to escalate, rise up, and drown what it means to really live.....it threatens to storm across the old secure borders, to overwhelm the protective sand dunes and the river banks of our lives, leave us no place to stand, and finally cover our heads... and we lose...our...lives.

At this point I've always found it important to stop and define the word "life" in the root way the Bible means it. When the Bible is talking about life it is not talking about mere existence. It is not chiefly referring to the heart pumping blood and the lungs sucking air on planet Earth. That's *existence*, but it's not necessarily *LIFE*. Real life is always relational, real life as the Bible

defines the word is always a quality of relationship between persons. To be left alone in one's *existence* is not *life* as the Biblical witness defines it.

We have another word for being left alone in one's existence. It's called hell.

So, again, if we as Christians are going to speak about what it means to truly live we must understand that we're always speaking of a quality of relationship between persons. Eternal Life, therefore, is a quality of relationship with the person who IS eternal life and who has given us the capacity to *receive* eternal life....a quality of relationship that heals every wound, fills every joy, and overflows into every other relationship. This is Biblical Life with a capital "L" and it is for us the one single context that gives the one true meaning of our existence. Seek ye first this Life...and it can overflow into the rest of life.

Unless we understand this we cannot grasp the deep significance of the teaching we are meant to receive from today's scriptures....the significance of God's rainbow covenant with Noah or with Jesus walking down and into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized. In both of these Biblical episodes nothing short of Life in its fullest sense is at stake.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And 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 cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and all flesh that is on the earth.

Who doesn't stop and with delight take notice anytime they see a rainbow! If you happen to be with someone either in a

car or outside or looking through a window and a rainbow appears, who doesn't stop and with delight say...."Oh look! There's a rainbow! See! Right over there!"

A few weeks ago before the flood waters came Annetta and I were driving up to Florence to attend a small concert that some old friends of ours were giving. Suddenly off to the right of I-95 there it was. A full rainbow from earth to cloud and back down to earth...the kind of rainbow that could give you the sense that you could start from either side and walk right up into heaven.

The picture I had printed in the service bulletin is one I took in 2016 while Annetta and I were having an early evening meal on the coast of Wales. Suddenly out the window there it was...a full rainbow! I jumped up out of my seat, hurried outside, and took some pictures.

Rainbows are very special to Annetta and me. At the very beginning of our marriage over 35 years ago we were making our first trip to Scotland. We had just finished our tour of the little town of Killen in the mid highlands and which is the ancient home ground for Clan MacNab. It was a lovely day and I was indeed full of this strange sense of being "home." As we were driving out of town I saw the entrance to a little golf course. Well! To play golf on the ground of Clan MacNab! Had to happen! It should not surprise you that I happened to have my golf clubs with me. It was just a little 9 hole course and in those days there was a little box by the first tee where using the honor system you dropped a couple of British pound coins in and off you went.

As I said it was a simple 9 hole course that essentially went up a large hill, had a few holes on top, then you played back downhill. I believe it was in the middle of the 7th fairway still on top of the hill when it happened. Annetta was making the walk with me, it was late in the day, we were about the only ones on the course, when suddenly there it was..... a huge rainbow suddenly touched the ground not 15 feet from where I was standing and went right up into the clouds of heaven! Of course the rainbow wasn't stationary but was moving back up the golf course with the cloud from whence it came. Without thinking this grown man suddenly became a child, dropped my golf bag, and like a little boy chasing his daddy in a game of tag, began to run after the rainbow laughing my head off.

The rainbow won the race but I didn't care. It was a special moment for Annetta and for me and we'll never forget it. In my heart for just a moment I was simply a child who felt like he got to play with God. It was also a moment that forever marked the beginning of our marriage. We have known storms. But we have been followed by rainbows.

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

In the time of Noah the bow of course was a weapon. It was a weapon that could send death from a distance swift as lightning. When after the great flood God makes his covenant with Noah he is saying to Noah and to all of us, "See, I am laying down my bow."

Picture the curved shape of a bow. Now picture one end of the bow reaching down to touch the ground and the center of the bow held firmly in the grip of God reaching upward into the heavens. Hear what God is saying in the symbol he has created... I am going to take the instrument of death, He says, and use it...I am going to use it to create a bridge of opportunity. I am going to transform death from a weapon of fear. I am going to lay down this fearful bow as a bridge over the tide of troubled waters...I am going to lay it across the escalating waters of sin you would constantly bring over the tops of your own heads. I am going to give you a way out." God is saying that he is going to lay down his bow in such a way so as to use deatha particular death.... as our bridge into the one eternal relationship the child inside each of us longs for.

And this is our cue to turn to the beginning of Mark's Gospel:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he rose up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

I am sometimes asked, if Jesus was the sinless Son of God why did he get baptized? There are several good answers but my favorite it this: Jesus didn't go down into those waters hoping to wash something off. He went down to make a statement to

the Father and to us that he was accepting his calling ...he was accepting his calling to take it all on.

And at the moment of his baptism a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Who is the beloved Son of God? The one who comes to take it all on; the one who comes to immerse himself in the floodtide of human sin; the one whose life our God lays down like a bow ...to touch the fallen flesh of humanity; the one whose death becomes our bridge over death... whose death becomes our bridge over many troubled waters.

God has set his bow in the heavens as a covenant promise and sent his Son to the earth to keep it.

Let me close with a final story. Six years ago Annetta and I had the opportunity to return to Scotland. We of course spent time in Killen which happened to coincide with a time of festival and hosting the Highland Games. To be honest I had forgotten about the golf course until we were once again driving out of town and I happen to catch the entrance out of the corner of my eye. I quickly spun the car into the parking area, put the car in park, turned to Annetta...we both smiled...and then in unison simply said "rainbow." In honor of that moment we had to get out of the car so we could look up that hill where so many years ago the gift of a defining moment had occurred. They'd built a new clubhouse by that time so on this occasion we were forced to walk around it in order to look up the hill and pay our respects to a memory. We rounded the corner....and there it was.....at the top of the hill ...a rainbow.....fixed on the spot where years ago a young woman was with a young man who had dropped his golf bag to laugh, and run, and play a game of tag with God.

Annetta and I have known our storms. But we have been followed by rainbows.

And she and I would say to all of you, this is indeed the Christian legacy: God speaks to all of us this morning and says, *I have set my bow in the clouds and sent my Son to the earth....that you may have Life...and have it abundantly.*

This is the Word of The Lord. (Thanks be to God!)