

First Sunday in Lent

8Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10and 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. 11I 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.” 12God 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: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I 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. 16When 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.” 17God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Author's Note: This analysis is based on an exegetical debate about the meaning and significance of the Hebrew word in v. 13 that is usually translated as “bow.” Some see this passage as an etiological explanation of the origin of the rainbow (Westermann). Others (Wellhausen and Gunkel) see “bow” as the warrior’s bow that God has put aside and has hung in the clouds as a reminder of God’s promise never again to destroy the world with flood. This analysis includes both interpretations.

DIAGNOSIS: Waging War

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“Storm Clouds Gather”*

Whether the great flood of Genesis was a great world-wide catastrophe of a “pre-historic” time or some local disaster that was creatively expanded in the imagination of the writer makes little difference. The point is that there is a dangerous world out there. The dangers can be from a “natural” world where disasters threaten to crush life at the drop of a hat. The dangers can be from the “human” world where nations, communities, gangs, tribes and individuals brutally threaten to impose their will on all who oppose their interests. The ecological dangers of our day remind us that even the natural world can be corrupted by human sin. In the words of Genesis, the firmament holding back the waters of chaos threaten to crack open at any moment drowning us in watery chaos. We feel like we are under siege, about to be attacked. Someone or something is at war with us. Life is dangerous. It can kill you.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *“Running for Cover”*

In order to deal with such threats, we run for cover. We seek the shelter of someone or something that will protect us from the attack that is coming. We give them our trust and loyalty. We fear, love and trust them above anything else. We make them our gods. Until...they let us down and betray us. The world of Noah is infested with violence and corruption. People are desperate, running from one shelter to the next in search of cover. We live in fear of an enemy who will attack. We know not when.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *“It’s Too Late!”*

Finally, the war begins. The enemy attacks. The floodgates open. Chaos descends. Our world is drowning. (You can make your own

list of catastrophes. Life is filled with them.) We are unable to escape. Are we simply victims of a capricious world, or culprits deserving this fate? In the end, it hardly matters. No one escapes the primordial chaos of Genesis 1:2. However, then we must face this dreadful possibility. If such catastrophes are not random, then we have been targeted. Somehow, someone has inflicted this fate upon us. Could it be that none other than God has aimed “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (cf. Hamlet) at us? Has God had it with us? Are we simply getting what we deserve? Could it be that our descent into chaos is not by chance but the deliberate result of God’s decision to give the world what it deserves? Could it be that God like a great warrior wages war on world that had become corrupt and rebellious? If so, guess who wins?

PROGNOSIS: “Waging Peace”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *“Unilateral Disarmament”*

God wins but surprisingly and ironically in way in which the world wins too.

Like a warrior, God shoots arrows from his bow in an avalanche of water from the heavens above and the fountains below. Noah and his ark survive. However, it is not the same old world. In an amazing about-face, with mercy that is mindboggling, God in a unilateral act of disarmament, places his weapon, his bow, in the sky. God lays aside God’s own judgment. God puts away God’s own wrath. The very sign of war and destruction (the bow) has become the symbol of God’s peace and mercy (the rainbow in the sky). God makes a promise, a covenant, a unilateral commitment to never again destroy the world with a weapon like this. Never again will God drown the world in the waters of chaos.

Unlike the usual bilateral covenants of the ancient world, where two parties obligate themselves to meet certain conditions in

order to receive certain benefits from the other, here God simply acts. God binds himself to his word just as God had previously done in unilateral covenants with Abraham and David. So that God himself will always remember this promise, God places his bow in the sky. God's weapon will now be a sign of peace. Every time a rainbow appears in the sky, God is holding himself accountable. God is reminding himself that he has set aside his weapon. God has made an eternal commitment to wage peace and create a world where both the human and natural worlds are at peace with each other and with God.

The bow in the sky also foreshadows what God would do in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God's unilateral commitment to love the world is confirmed. At the cross, a weapon of destruction becomes a weapon of peace. There God sets aside God's judgment for the sake of the world.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *"Remembering the Promise"*

God had made a similar promise to Noah before the watery destruction. Noah believed and had the confidence to continue building the ark in spite of ridicule and criticism. His faith was not disappointed. He survived the flood. Through him and his descendants God was able to begin creation anew. Just as the bow in the sky would always remind Noah and his descendants of God's faithfulness, so also does the cross of Christ reminds us of God's faithfulness. Remembering God's promise in the cross, we too can be confident of the future—even as we face the very real ecological threat of descent into watery chaos. In spite of those threats, we are at peace and trust that inside "the ark of the church" we can pass through the watery chaos to the safety of God's future.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *"A World at Peace"*
No longer afraid of the threats behind the gathering storm

clouds, we do not have to run for cover and seek shelter in the empty promises of the false gods that infest this world. Neighbors are no longer rivals. Strangers are no longer enemies. Caring for others who may live in fear, we assure them of God's love not only by pointing to the rainbow but also to the cross. There we see that God has laid aside his weapon. Therefore, we can lay aside ours, unafraid to do what it takes care for a world that now lives in the blessed shadow of God's bow and God's cross.