

**July 26, 2015 – Genesis 9:8-17 (Epistle: Ephesians 3:14-21 Gospel: Mark 6:45-56)**

*God Reassures Us with Visible Signs of His Grace and Salvation*

“What a pretty rainbow!” That is often what someone says when they see one after a storm. But a rainbow is much more than a beautiful, natural phenomenon caused by the reflection, refraction and dispersion of sunlight passing through raindrops. A rainbow is a gift from God – it is the sign of a covenant that He has made with you.

The story of Noah, the ark and the rainbow is very familiar to us all. It is included in probably every children’s Bible story book and Sunday School curricula. When I was a child, I had a toy ark – one of those round boats with a little house on top that came with two of a number of different animals and figurines of Noah and his family. Hollywood has even gotten in on the action with a recent movie about Noah. They took a number of liberties with the story, however, so if you watch the movie, I encourage read the original account in Genesis 6-9 so that you are not misled by any of Hollywood’s embellishments. The Book really is better than the movie.

But even though we are so familiar with this account, do we always remember what it is about? A while back I saw on the internet a set of drawings for an “honest” children’s Bible story book. The artist had drawn the pictures to poke fun at the Bible. Instead of the stereotypical picture of the ark floating on calm water under clear skies, the picture this person drew showed the ark in the distance under dark clouds on a stormy sea with animals and people screaming and drowning in the foreground. This drawing was supposed to make us chuckle at the “inappropriateness” of that illustration for a children’s book or even make us question the goodness of God, but it really is an accurate picture of the flood, even if it is not one that we like to consider.

With our toy arks and cartoonish drawing we can sugar-coat this account. But the flood was an act of God’s judgment and wrath. Its purpose was to destroy man and beast from the face of the earth (Genesis 6:7). The Lord sent the flood because He “*saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Genesis 6:5). The flood shows how seriously God takes sin and how deadly sin is.

If you had lived in Noah’s day, where would you have been when the rain started falling? On which side of the door of the ark would you have found yourself? By nature, the thoughts of our hearts are only evil continually. We deserve only to be shut out of the ark because of the things that we have done that God does not want us to do, and the evil thoughts that we have. And the flood did not remove the corruption caused by man’s fall into sin. After the flood God still said that “*the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth*” (Genesis 8:21).

So why was Noah and his family saved? It wasn’t because Noah was intrinsically better than everyone else – by nature he was just as sinful – but we are told that “*Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord*” (Genesis 6:8). It was only because of God’s undeserved favor that he and his family were saved through the water. And it is only by God’s undeserved favor that we are saved.

Some claim that God was not fair in only saving Noah and his family. But God gave mankind 120 years to repent and turn to Him (Genesis 6:3), but they did not. 2 Peter 2:5 calls Noah “*a preacher of righteousness*” and we read in Hebrews 11:7, “*By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world...*” Noah warned about the coming judgment by his words and by his action of building the ark. The ark was a visible warning to the people of his day and a visible condemnation of the world. In 1 Peter 3:20 we read that “*the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.*” God waited for the people to repent and turn to Him and be saved. But they did

not. Instead of listening to Noah's words and heeding the sign of the ark, they probably just made fun of him for building such a big boat in the middle of dry land.

So God did send the flood and destroyed every living creature from the face of the earth, except for those on the ark. Noah was in the ark for over a year. Imagine what that must have been like! After having gone through such a catastrophe, I imagine he would have worried every time storm clouds arose. He would have wondered: "Is God going to destroy mankind again because of our evil?"

But in our text God speaks to Noah and says: "*as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you...Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth*" (v. 9-11). This was good news for Noah. There would be no reason for him to worry when it began to rain. God established a covenant that He "*will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth*" (Genesis 8:21). This covenant was not just for Noah, but also his descendants, and for all generations. This covenant is for you.

A covenant is a contract – a solemn promise. A covenant, however, cannot be seen. A promise is just words that may be forgotten. Even if it is written down, the written copy can be lost. Here God gives us something better. He establishes a sign of His promise: "*I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth*" (v. 13). The rainbow is a reminder for us of God's promise to never again destroy the world with a flood. And God said that when a rainbow appears: "*I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh*" (v. 15).

This does not mean that God would ever forget. He is faithful and He never forgets His promises. But God says that He will remember when He sees the rainbow to reassure us. We can start to worry when storm clouds threaten and wonder if God has forgotten His promise. Even though we know that God would never forget, our faith can falter. God here gives us the assurance that when we see a rainbow, He sees it too and it tells us that He does remember His promise not to destroy us with a flood.

I lived for many years in Missouri, the "Show-Me" state. The desire to see something with one's own eyes is not limited to Missourians, however. In the Gospels we see many examples of this. The disciples ask Jesus what would be the sign of His coming and the sign of the end of the age (Matthew 24:3, Mark 13:4, Luke 21:7). The Jews demanded that Jesus perform some sign to convince them that He really was the Son of God (John 2:18, 6:30). Phillip said to Jesus, "*Lord, show us the Father...*" (John 14:9). And Thomas said, "*Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.*"

God knows that we want to see with our eyes, so He has given us visible signs of His grace and salvation in addition to His rainbow.

When the Israelites complained against God and Moses in the wilderness, "*the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people*" (Numbers 21:6). God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole so that anyone who is bitten and looks at it would live (Numbers 21:8-9). It was a visible sign of healing and salvation from God.

This serpent on a pole prefigured and pointed to Jesus. Jesus said: "*as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should*

*not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:14-15). God chose the Roman cross as the method of execution to punish His perfect and sinless Son in our place for our sins. God did not explicitly say that the cross is to be a sign for us, but we place it on our churches and our altars as a visual reminder that Jesus died to pay for our sins.

The crosses that we use are empty, just like Jesus’ tomb, for Jesus is no longer on the cross and He is no longer dead. He paid for the sins of the world by dying on cross once for all. He was buried. He rose again from the dead, and has ascended into heaven. The empty cross helps to remind us of these things – it reminds us of the salvation we have through Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

Jesus Himself instituted a couple visible means by which we receive His salvation and favor. Noah’s ark pointed one to of these – it pointed to baptism. We read this in 1 Peter 3:20-21: *“the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*

“Antitype” is a fancy word that refers to something that is represented by something else. In this case the ark saving the eight members of Noah’s family through the flood is a “type” of baptism. Baptism is the reality to which the ark pointed – it is the antitype of the ark.

We see here that baptism is more than just a sign. It says baptism *“now saves us”*, like the ark saved Noah and his family. It is not a symbolic removal of outward dirt, but *“the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”* (Titus 3:5). Unlike the ark, however, the salvation given to us through baptism is not a temporary, earthly one, but it is an eternal salvation. Baptism gives us eternal life *“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”*. When you see a baptism, remember your baptism and that through it God has washed away all your sins.

In a few moments you will partake in another visual means by which God assures you of the forgiveness of your sins: communion – the Lord’s Supper. Mark 14:22-24 records Jesus’ institution of this visual gift: *“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, ‘This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.’”*

Again we see that this is not just a sign or symbol. Jesus says that the bread *is* His body and the wine *is* His blood. In communion you receive His true body and true blood in the visible bread and wine. And not only that, you touch it and taste it. Through these senses, God assures of His grace and salvation and strengthens your faith.

And notice that Jesus said: *“This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.”* Here we have that word again: covenant. Jesus blood, which you receive in and with the wine, is the seal of God’s promise and contract to you that, because Jesus gave His body up to death and shed His blood on the cross, your sins have been removed and you have eternal life. It is a visible reminder that *“the blood of Jesus Christ [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7). When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we proclaim in a visual way the Lord’s death for our sins, and for the sins of the whole world (1 Corinthians 11:26)

Rainbows are beautiful. They are beautiful not only because of their appearance, but because they were given by God as a visible sign of His grace and salvation. Next time you see one, take a moment to remember what it is: the sign of God’s promise. And remember the visible means of grace that God has given you: remember your baptism to which the ark pointed, and remember

the Lord's supper in which you receive Jesus' body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. May these visible gifts of God strengthen your faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and fill you with the assurance that God has saved you through His Son.

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