

## ***Chasing Rainbows***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

August 8, 2021

Text: Genesis 9:8-17

The story of Noah and the rainbow is one of the bible stories most familiar to people generally, not just those of us in the church. I would argue it is more familiar than either Christmas or Easter whose religious foundations have been hidden under layers of secular traditions, like flying reindeers and hopping bunnies. The story of Noah, on the other hand, appears in secular settings with its biblical framework clear to see. Noah and the ark crammed with happy animal couples hanging out the portholes are a not uncommon theme for nurseries and toddler play areas, regardless of the family's religious tradition or lack thereof. Everyone knows the story of Noah building the ark and loading the animals on it two by two as the rain begins to fall. Soon the ark is floating along in rolling waves, Noah looking slightly anxious on the deck while the animals are still hanging out the portholes. Then, the rain stops and the waters recede so that eventually everyone exits the ark safely. God realizes the error of this great catastrophe for the humanity God created and places a rainbow in the sky to remind God's self to never destroy the world again in this way. In this simplistic version of the story, the rainbow is like a multi-colored string tied around God's finger as a reminder never to use floods to destroy the world.

Nice story. Lovely even. It's easy to see why it has become a popular theme for nurseries and child care spaces. What's not to love? Smiling, kindly Noah. Adorable animal pairs scrambling on to a boat. A bit of a cruise on rough seas and then it's all over leaving a pretty rainbow in its wake. Except this is not a pretty story and it was never intended to be. It's actually a story about God's rage at what God sees as the irredeemable sinfulness of the humanity God had created with such love and visions of shalom in mind. The story of Noah is really a story about just how badly humans blew God's plans for them and how God responded. That's why it has always amazed me that the story of Noah's Ark has become such a popular one for decorating nurseries and child care rooms in churches and pre-schools. Anyone who thinks of Noah's story as a cute one for children

has really missed the entire point of the story. And, dear ones, that is so very easy to do.

I've done it myself in years past, with Vacation Bible Schools and Children's Day programs organized on a Noah theme complete with crafts and activities and songs. In fact, one of my favorite children's songs is actually about Noah and the ark. Maybe you know it – Rise and Shine.

*Chorus: Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory!  
Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory!  
Rise and shine and (clap once) give God the glory, glory!  
Children of the Lord.*

*The Lord said to Noah, "There's gonna be a floody, floody."  
Lord said to Noah, "There's gonna be a floody, floody."  
"Get those children (clap once) out of the muddy, muddy!"  
Children of the Lord.*

*So Noah, he built him, he built him an arky, arky.  
Noah, he built him, he built him an arky, arky.  
Made it out of (clap once) birchy barky, barky.  
Children of the Lord.*

*The animals, they came on, they came on by twosies, twosies.  
The animals, they came on, they came on by twosies, twosies.  
Elephants and (clap once) kangaroosies, roosies.  
Children of the Lord.*

*Chorus*

Honestly, I love this song! I love teaching it to kids and have probably taught it to hundreds of kids over the decades. It highlights the happiest parts of the Noah story – Noah cooperating with God to save a few people and a few animals from a coming flood. It's a song that's just fun to sing. In fact, if you google "Rise and Shine" you will find not only all different sets of lyrics, you'll also find recordings of the song done by as diverse performers as Dionne Warwick and Kylie Jenner. I can't even...

The thing is, though, that Noah's story is not and never was a children's story. It was always intended as an adult story, a story about God's dreams dashed on the rocks of the sinfulness of humanity. It's a story about overcoming cataclysmic events that overtake us and are beyond our control. It's a story about coming back from events we never expected to happen to us and yet they do. Hurricanes, wild fires, floods (still), wars, famine, drought and, of course, disease – these are the horrific events that

will destroy the human spirit given the chance. These are the events in which we search for the hand of God. We scream at God, “why?” and then pray to God for deliverance. Noah’s story is truly about the absolute worst moments of human existence and how we respond to them.

Even more importantly, Noah’s story is about how God is present in all those horrific, unforeseen, and frightening moments of life. In Noah’s story, the unthinkable and destructive flood is ascribed to God for the simple reason that only God was thought to be able to command such power as revealed in forces of nature apparent in catastrophic flooding. Undoubtedly Noah’s story is an attempt to describe an actual historical flood which historians know happened in that part of the world in ancient times. Such a flood is recorded in the religious texts and art work of other cultures of the same time period. But the ancient Hebrews whose sacred story this was, took the flood story to another whole new level. They added this remarkable notion of a covenant, or a formal agreement, between God and Noah formed in the aftermath of the flood. God’s covenant with Noah, symbolized by the rainbow in the sky, is the first such covenant in the bible. Many more were to follow – the Ten Commandments for example – but this agreement between God and Noah was the first time God made a promise to a human. God promises never again to destroy the world and everyone and everything in it by flood. This is in fact what makes it a covenant which is actually a promise made between unequal partners. In a covenant, one partner is superior and the other is inferior and the promise made is one of protection. God promises to protect Noah and all Creation from this kind of horrific event ever happening again. No demands are made of Noah. There are no requirements Noah, or humanity for that matter, have to meet. God just promises protection and, as a reminder to God’s own self, God places God’s bow in the sky. And yes, it is intended as a representation of God’s bow as in bow and arrow. So, that cute little rainbow decoration that gets plastered everywhere is actually a depiction of a deadly weapon. Who knew? Well, now you do.

So, if we are not to see this story of Noah and the rainbow as a cutesy little children’s bible story, what are we to find in it? What is the point for us? Well, that at least is fairly simple. The story of Noah and the rainbow is

really about reminding ourselves of our belief, our trust, our faith, that God the Creator is also always God the Sustainer. God never, ever abandons us to the randomness of life. God never walks away when we are overcome by natural or manmade disasters. God never walks away from us when diseases threaten to overwhelm, when the damage we have done to the climate becomes more and more apparent. God never abandons us.

However, we humans do have an unfortunate tendency to abandon God. We walk away from God quite easily, especially when things are going well. We want God to be there when we need comfort and reassurance, and we expect God to wait around when things are going well and we have somewhere else we think we need to be. And amazingly, God gets that about us and God loves us through and beyond those moments when we simply take God for granted. This is what I find so powerful and lasting in Noah's story. It is at its core a story about hope – God's unfailing hope that humanity can be better than it has thus far been able to be AND humanity's hope that God's patience with us and all our shortcomings will remain boundless and unlimited. Simply put, we continue chasing after the rainbows of hope God is always offering us. We screw up. God sees us screw up. God offers us unconditional love and forgiveness so that we can start all over again. The rainbow is our reminder of this endless cycle always bounded by hope. The only real question is – when will we stop chasing rainbows and start living in their midst? When will we rise to the challenge of living God's hopes and dreams for each of us into reality, daring to believe that God does not make mistakes, even in creating us, fragile and flawed creatures that we are? When will we dare to see beyond the happy façade of Noah's story to the deep truth of hope and possibilities it reveals? That, dear ones, is totally up to you.

*Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory!  
Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory!  
Rise and shine and (clap once) give God the glory, glory!  
Children of the Lord.*

Amen.