

Good cold, sunny Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport.....

I woke up a little later than usual this morning, after having one of those terrible dreams we often have right before waking up – in this dream I was trying to get ready for church, which was going to start in a few minutes. My sermon wasn't finished, nor was the bulletin. No one could help me. Our dogs were running "off leash" and somehow I was pouring coffee all over the counter and onto the floor. I couldn't see my computer laptop page and there were "strange people" milling all around who seemed not to care less about my distress..... Anyone else ever have a dream like that – maybe about your work situation, or a home situation or a situation that makes no sense at all??? I like to believe we have dreams like that so they won't happen in "real life." That's when I wake up with a start and say to myself, "THANK GOD, that was only a bad dream!!!"

And so, here we are at the beginning of Lent, the first Sunday in Lent... Maybe that bad dream of mine this morning was meant to remind me of Jesus' wandering in the desert for forty days, wrestling with the devil. If so, I get it! We wrestle and wrestle and then move on to the next day, the next trauma, the next challenge, *and* the reminder from the Bible that we can get through anything if we remember God, as "God remembered Noah." (Genesis 8:1)

I know I've said this before, **AND** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, **AND** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... Your support spurs me on and gives me hope for the future of us all.....

Blessings to each one on this first Sunday in Lent..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT, AGAIN, to download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermons to Federated's Facebook page.... Lately downloading to Facebook has been a "hit or miss" affair! Margie tells me there may be a way to do this through Zoom..... I'm an "old dog," and new ways of doing things don't come easy for me. Anyone else have that problem????

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, February 21, 2021
the First Sunday in Lent
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

O God, we still live in a broken world
desperate for the grace of new beginnings.

Help us to trust your rainbow sign,
even in this time of separation and too many losses
and to share your covenant of caring with all creation.

Let us worship God, yet again through cyberspace,
but longing for the day when we can again
worship you in the flesh, side by side.

Amen.

A Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon for the first Sunday in Lent

Compassionate God, I do not always do what is right in your eyes.
Sometimes I think hateful thoughts about those with whom I don't agree.
Sometimes I waste time and then complain I can't get my work done.

Sometimes I make excuses for my words and actions,
and for those words and actions I should have said and done, but didn't.

Sometimes I say "yes" when I really wanted to say "no."

Sometimes I say "no" when I should have said "yes."

Sometimes I could kick myself and other times I wish I hadn't.

Sometimes I am forgiven when I shouldn't be forgiven.

Sometimes I don't forgive and hold on to grudges like a dog with a bone.

Help me to change these "sometimes" into "almost nevers," O God.

You know that I am human, and so

I have a mind with which to think both good and evil thoughts.

Help me to choose good more often than evil, O God.

I promise I will work harder to remember your rainbow of love
rather than my human capacity to see the worst rather than the best in others....

Know this – God sees it all....

And as God "remembered Noah," God will always remember us, too....

Amen.

Readings of Scripture – Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and 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. I 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.”

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 clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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.

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.” 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.”

“I have set my bow....”

A sermon based on Genesis 9:8-17

Will you pray with me. God of the rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar, teach us to see you in the midst of cloud and sun, despair and delight. Show us the way we might say “yes” to your covenant promise to never leave us alone in our trials or our triumphs. Amen.

This is a special day. It is the first Sunday of Lent, that time of the Christian year in which we are called to reflect for the next six weeks – forty days minus Sundays, on our shortcomings and mistakes while we hear at the same time of God’s promise to never leave us alone in our wanderings through life.

The season of Lent is full of paradox – dark becomes light, wandering in the wilderness becomes wondering at the mystery, and God’s promise of relationship forever more with all in creation trumps all the evil and chaos and disarray of so much of life. We sing hymns that reflect this amazing balancing act of despair and delight in a life of faith. We will together sing them again, hopefully in 2021! We enter the journey with the newer hymn, “In the Midst of New Dimensions.” We honor “Fairest Lord Jesus.” We proclaim “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” We affirm, “Jesus Loves Me.” And we often ask in song, “Teach Us What We Yet May Be.” All of them reflect our lives.

I love this season. Lent is kind of like spending forty days in our spiritual mud rooms cleaning the dirt off our boots so when Easter comes we’ll have clean and sparkling feet as we set out into lives resurrected and renewed in mind, body and spirit.

This morning we begin this Lenten journey at the beginning, in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. As the story goes, the great flood of mythic proportions has subsided. Noah and his family and all the animals with them in the arc have survived the flood. Then God remembers Noah. And he makes Noah a promise – “never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Gen 9:11)

When we think of the number of massive and dramatic events that have struck parts of the earth in recent years, we could get a little nervous about this promise God made to Noah. From tsunamis to deadly pandemics, from political strife gone totally awry to snowstorm catastrophes happening where they shouldn't, we are often placed in out-of-control situations which we seem unable to affect or have any power to overcome. Has God had a change of heart, we ask? Has God stopped remembering us, Noah's descendants? I would answer “no.” There's been no change of heart, no forgetting about us... just a reminder that both destructive and creative occurrences are part of life, evil and goodness, hardship and success exist side by side.

I don't believe God leaves us alone in our trials and triumphs, but I do believe God wonders if we have forgotten our end of the bargain. Did we ever sign on to the covenant promise God made to Noah? If you read or hear the daily news in one form or another, you know we haven't come very far in our ability to get along with one another as a national or global family. It's not that God hasn't held up the *holy* end of the promise. It's that much of the time we haven't held up the *human* end of it.

As the story goes, God says to Noah, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and 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. I 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.” 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 clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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.” (Gen 9:9-15)

The bow which God set in the clouds is a rainbow to human eyes. Jewish interpretation of our passage for today tells us “in ancient mythologies a rainbow

represented a weapon used by gods in battle. The bows would be hung in the sky as symbols of victory. In Babylonian tradition, for example, the god Marduk suspended his bow in the heavens after he defeated Tiamat, the goddess of the deep waters. The Bible has retained aspects of such myths. The Hebrew word “keshet” means both “bow of war” and “rainbow,” but as usual the Torah [the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures] has assimilated the material to convey a deeper meaning. It believes that God is the proximate cause of all natural events and that manifestations of the natural order are invested with divine portent. Thunder, earthquakes, and floods fall under this rubric, as does the rainbow. The text sees the bow both as a sign of God’s rulership over the natural order and as a permanent signature of God’s promise. The rainbow is thought to remind God of this promise and to remind us of the grace and forbearance of the Creator.”^[1]

God remembers *us*. The bottom line question is..... Do *we* remember God? God makes us a promise for all time. And we tend to respond too often, “Well... maybe... if I’m not busy... if it doesn’t take too long or too much effort... if there’s not a ball game on I want to watch... or there’s not too many things on my “to do list” today...” I have muttered all of those excuses at one time or another for not remembering God’s promise, so I have to believe you do, too. I *want* to remember God. I’m a pastor, for God’s sake! But some days, I’m just too busy to think about the rainbow drenched promise of God to be with me always, no matter what.

Here’s a list of some definitions of the word “rainbow.” Rainbow can mean “a multicolored arc in the sky” – as in the rainbow that shows up across Penobscot Bay after a summer shower and the sun has come out, or “an arc of bands of color” – as in the rainbow flag that symbolizes the gay rights movement, or “a bright multicolored sight” – as in Mardi Gras is a rainbow gala, or “a false hope” – as in “chasing rainbows,” or “a varied assortment” – as in a rainbow medley of fresh fruit.

When you think of a rainbow, what comes to mind? If we were together this morning, I’d ask for your responses. When I think of a rainbow, I think of miracle. Yes, I know there is a scientific explanation for why that arc of color appears in the sky in the distance linking storm and sun, rain over Penobscot Bay and sun on my back to the west. I know... there’s a rational, intellectual reason for rainbows. But I am always, always in awe when I witness a rainbow. And it’s double awe when there are two, or very rarely three to behold. And every time I witness this amazing phenomenon, I say to myself, “Wow! How does that

happen?” And then it’s gone, either into the dark clouds, or dispersed by bright sun.

God upholds the holy promise, the commitment, the covenant made with Noah and his family, all the animals in the arc, and all of creation. God sets the bow in the clouds as a reminder of that promise. Let us witness that promise each day and never forget God’s presence among us, even for a moment.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our new President, and Congress, that they might do the right things in office for the betterment and future of all of us.....

And add to our prayers, **a request from Mimi for Kendall, who is 49 and has hereditary neuropathy. It is progressing rapidly and at some point he will be in braces.** Mike Sodano, who has had three-way bypass surgery this week, a friend of Mimi’s and known to many in Thomaston, “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; and continued prayers for Hank Cary, Ed Lee, Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine,

Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday.....

AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.

A Benediction

*Life is short, no matter the length of our days.
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those
who make the way with us.
So be swift to love.
Make haste to be kind.
And may the creator of us all,
the redeemer of us all,*

*and the sustainer of us all
be with you now and forever.
Amen.*

(adapted from the words of Henri Frederic Amiel, 1821 – 1881,
Swiss moral philosopher, poet & critic)

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

For Sunday, February 28, 2021 – Second Sunday of Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Words to ponder today about “Lent”.....

“Lent is a time for discipline, for confession for honesty, not because God is mean or fault-finding or finger-pointing but because God want us to know the joy of being cleaned out, ready for all the good things God now has in store.”

~ N. T. Wright, English theologian

“I imagine Lent for you and for me as a great departure from the greedy, anxious antineighborliness of our economy, a great departure from our exclusionary politics that fears the other, a great departure from self-indulgent consumerism that devours creation. And then an arrival in a new neighborhood, because it is a gift to be simple, it is a gift to be free; it is a gift to come down where we ought to be.”

~ Walter Bruegemann, American theologian, in *A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*

“Each year, around the latter part of winter, Lent arrives. It nearly always surprises me. Here it is, once again, summoning me to change how I typically live.”

~ W. David O. Taylor, Professor of Theology and Culture, ordained Anglican priest

“Those have a short Lent who owe money to be paid at Easter.”

~ Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States

[1] *The Torah, A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition*, W. Gunther Plaut, General Editor, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2006, p. 74.