

A BOW IN THE CLOUDS

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Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:13-4:2

***“I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign
of the covenant between me and the earth.”***

Genesis 9:13

Parkland. Doesn't it sound like a lovely place to live?

I'm sure Parkland, Florida *was* a lovely place to live, until the crack of the gunshots was heard inside the local high school.

Seventeen people dead, most of them children. Fifteen more taken to the hospital. The numbers are mind-numbingly real. And sadly, all too familiar.

We've seen it before. Many times. It used to be exceptional. Now, when that sort of news bulletin goes out, people respond by saying “*another* school shooting.”

The fact that “school shooting” is even a category is, to my mind, an abomination.

The murderer — and I won't mention his name because I think we need to be careful about giving publicity to terrorists like him — used a military-style weapon that has no useful function other than killing people.

The shooter bought his weapon a year ago — legally — when he was just 18 years old. He wasn't old enough to buy a drink in a bar, but he could legally

buy a rifle that's a close approximation to standard military issue. It fires rapidly enough to kill or maim dozens of people in a very few minutes: which is exactly what he did.

By all accounts, he was a deeply troubled young man. His isolation and anti-social behavior had attracted the attention of law enforcement officials.

We all know there are a variety of opinions about what should be done to make America's schools and other public institutions — including churches — safer places. Some say we should have stricter gun-control laws (although with one gun for every person in America, that may be like closing the barn door after the horses have gone). Others say we should focus not on the guns but on the people: instituting more comprehensive mental-health screening. Still others say we should do both, in equal measure.

Clearly, doing nothing — beyond comforting the survivors — is not a viable option. There have been way too many of these incidents for any of us to believe the problem's going away on its own.

But still, our elected leaders do little or nothing — other than offering the usual “thoughts and prayers.” I do believe in the power of prayer, but I also believe in the old advice that says, if you're stuck in a lifeboat on the open sea, you need to “Pray to God but row for shore.”

There's an old spiritual that gives us a bit of direction. It finds its inspiration in prophetic texts from the Hebrew scriptures:

**I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield
down by the riverside.
Ain't gonna study war no more.**

You may not have realized it, but there's a place in the Bible when God engages in a form of disarmament. It was our Old Testament lesson this morning. God declares to Noah, "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

"Well, that's not a bow, technically," you may object. "It's a rain-bow!" But — and here's the detail I find fascinating — the Hebrew word is exactly the same. The bow God places in the clouds is not a decorative feature, but a weapon.

Now I wouldn't be at all surprised if you find this image of God with a bow and arrows difficult to accept. What — in earth or heaven — is God doing with a bow? Far more comforting it is to imagine the Lord as a talented celestial artist, festooning the heavens with bands of brilliant color. It's jarring, to say the least, to picture God as a sweaty, musclebound warrior, weary from battle, unslinging the bow from across his shoulders, and hanging it high.

Yet that's precisely the image of God enshrined in this Hebrew text. We've

simply forgotten what the word “rainbow” means — so familiar have we become with those sweet nursery-school paintings of Noah in his ark, surrounded by the animals, rejoicing that the storm-clouds have passed. How easily we forget, in this story, that it's *God* who sent the storm-clouds in the first place — who savagely unleashed the flood-waters, obliterating nearly all of creation.

Well, what does it mean for us to regard God in this way — to see the bow in the clouds for what it truly is?

The first thing the bow in the sky tells us is that God can be dangerous: literally awe-inspiring. And not awe as in. “That’s amazing,” but awe that borders closely on terror. To stand in awe means to recognize a power vastly greater than ourselves.

During our years living in Dubuque, Iowa I can remember standing on the front porch of our house and watching the thunderheads turn positively green, at the approach of a tornado (the only one that came at all close to our town, in the nearly six years we lived there). The warning sirens had already gone off. I knew the only thing to do, then, was to get to the basement, as we'd been instructed, to hope for the best — but there was something that kept me on that porch just a few moments longer, rooted to the spot. That something was awe: awe at the sheer

force of nature arrayed before me.

It's not popular, these days, to think of God as at all dangerous. God's become, for so many of us, a friend, a buddy, a congenial traveling companion. *God is My Co-Pilot* was the title of a book, written by a World-War-2 Army flyer. He found it comforting, as he flew into mortal peril over China, to imagine the Lord of heaven and earth sitting in the seat beside him. Now I'd be the last person to begrudge any pilot, flying into combat, any mental picture that gives comfort — but from the standpoint of Noah, that book title seems just a trifle presumptuous. The God who places the bow in the clouds is not anybody's co-anything!

In C.S. Lewis' wonderful children's books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the figure who's symbolic of Jesus Christ is the fierce lion, Aslan. The two girls, Susan and Lucy, are getting ready to meet Aslan for the first time. They admit to Mrs. Beaver, who's preparing them for the encounter, that they're feeling just a bit anxious. "Is he quite safe?" asks Susan. "I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie," replies Mrs. Beaver. "And make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without his knees knocking, he's either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then isn't he safe?" asks Lucy.

"Safe," said Mr. Beaver, "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course, he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you!"

The God who hangs the bow in the clouds is the mighty king of all creation — not so safe, perhaps... not so easily domesticated... but thoroughly good.

The second thing we can observe about the God who hangs the bow in the clouds is that this all-powerful God wants to be in relationship with us. That's how the bow makes it into the clouds in the first place. The bad news of this story of Noah is how fierce and dangerous the Lord can become — but the good news is that God has no intention of ever doing so again.

The particular relationship God establishes with Noah is the covenant. Now there are many types of covenants in the Bible; the scholars have spilled a great deal of ink, over the years, comparing the various covenants in scripture with other covenants that existed in the ancient world. The covenant with Moses, for example, takes the form of what the scholars call a suzerainty agreement; it's laid out according to the same format as the treaty a conquering emperor would impose upon a newly-defeated king. There's an element of negotiation to it: I'll do something for you, and you do something for me in return.

This covenant with Noah is different. Biblical scholars refer to this form of covenant as a "royal grant." In a royal-grant covenant, a king rewards a loyal subject by granting an office, or land, or an exemption from taxes. In a royal-grant covenant, it's only the superior party who binds himself. There are no conditions imposed upon the inferior. The biblical covenants God makes with Noah, Abraham and David all fit this pattern. In each of these cases, it's God alone who chooses to make covenant, to be bound by a solemn oath.

Why does the Lord do it? Out of love. There's no other explanation. There's no one on earth who could disarm this fearsome warrior; yet the warrior himself voluntarily chooses to hang up his weapon, resolves to practice war no more.

There's another example of this kind of covenant in the Bible — a covenant leading to deeper relationship. It happens in the New Testament, at the Last Supper. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," Jesus proclaims. "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Here, God's covenant with the human race enters a new, and even surprising phase. The son of God, Jesus Christ, goes far beyond merely laying aside his weapons; he delivers himself up to be crucified, for the sins of the world. He buys a new relationship with humanity at the price of his own blood.

Which brings us to the final thing I'd like to say about the God who makes covenant. This is a God whose covenant brings about transformation.

In Genesis 9, the bow God hangs in the clouds is no longer a weapon of war; it has been transformed. It has become not a bow, but a rainbow.

A rainbow itself is made of transformed stuff. A rainbow, as you learned in grade-school science class, is composed of tiny droplets of water, suspended in the air. The sun shines through these drops of water, and its light is refracted, as through a prism. It's this refraction, this splitting-up, of white light that creates the rainbow's bands of color.

In a certain sense, therefore, the rainbow is made up of the storm itself. The water that once cascaded down upon the earth, sweeping everything before it, has now become a sign of grace. The dread reality that once called forth only terror is transformed into something beautiful.

The same may be said of another symbol, one that occupies the central place in our sanctuary: the cross.

The cross is a grisly instrument of torture and death. The *earliest* Christians didn't use it as a spiritual symbol, for that very reason. They preferred other symbols for their faith, like the "ichthus" or fish-symbol, or the picture of Jesus the

Good Shepherd, carrying a lamb to safety on his shoulders. This was because the reality of crucifixion was all too real to them. Yes, they knew Jesus had perished on a cross, and yes, they joyfully proclaimed his resurrection — but with crucifixion potentially awaiting some of them, if they fell into the hands of the authorities, they just couldn't bring themselves to wear the cross around their necks, or to display it in their worship-places.

All that changed when the emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the empire. As the empire itself had been transformed by the power of the gospel, so too the cross became transformed from an object of dread into an object of worship. As the bow of God the destroyer, hung up in the sky, had become a symbol of protection and peace, so too the cross of Christ came to be seen as a symbol of victory.

Years ago, PBS News commentator Bill Moyers put together a documentary TV series called "Genesis: A Living Conversation." He assembled ten groups of distinguished Bible scholars, church leaders and literary figures, to talk about this first book of the Bible.

In one of the early shows, they discussed this story of Noah. Moyers asked one of his panelists, a newspaper editor, what sort of headline he would write for

the Noah story. The editor was quick with his answer: "GOD DESTROYS WORLD."

One of the other panel members was the Rev. Dr. Samuel Proctor. For many years he was pastor of the great old Abyssinian Baptist Church, the leading African-American church in Harlem. Proctor had an alternative headline: "GOD GIVES HUMANS SECOND CHANCE."

Proctor then told how he first heard the Noah story from his father, a Sunday School teacher:

"Sometimes we laughed at the ridiculous aspects of it [he said, with a smile, but] we didn't try to rewrite it. We drew from it what it said right then to the people and went on. Every Wednesday, though, my daddy would press his trousers and go down to the Philharmonic Glee Club rehearsal. These sixty black guys — table waiters, coal trimmers, truck drivers — would give one big concert a year to the white population. [We] couldn't sit where we wanted to, even though our daddy was singing — we had to sit in the back. But in the midst of all that rejection, hate, and spite, they went. And do you know the song they sang at the close of the concert? They sang, "Yesterday the skies were gray/ but look this morning they are blue." Noah! "The smiling sun tells everyone come/ Let's all sing, hallelujah/ for a new day is born/ The world is singing the song of the dawn." Sixty black guys in tuxedos in the 1920's, with lynching everywhere and hatred....But they had something we need to recover right now. I can't turn loose this story of Noah and the Flood [Proctor concluded] because after all of the devastation... there's a rainbow...I'm not going to live without that kind of hope."

Old Sam Proctor had it exactly right. That rainbow in the sky is more than a

"warm fuzzy." It's a powerful symbol of hope: a piece of positive evidence, hung right up there before our very eyes, that God is not finished yet — not with the world, and not with us. There are wondrous changes yet to come, astonishing transformations yet to be experienced.

Dare we hope, here in the United States of America, that we can turn back this tide of gun violence? I believe we can, if we follow the example of our God who set the bow in the clouds: relying no longer on coercion and force, but rather on persuasion and love.

God's greatest act of persuasion and love was the giving of Jesus, his own son, to die for us. This Lent, may you and I come into ever greater awareness of what that sacrifice means — for us and for all creation!

Let us pray...

O God, we are grateful that you speak to us not only by a rainbow promise, but also by the death of your son, Jesus, on the cross. Help us to see, even in that dread symbol, a sure sign of your love for us. And help us to live, always, for his sake. Amen.

