

Reading The Rainbow

A sermon on Genesis 9:8-17 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 February 2024

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Message

Both contemporary and ancient understandings of the rainbow sign point to God's expansive love overcoming our fears and hostilities.

Sermon

One of the things that provokes plenty of angst and anger among some conservative Christians these days is the rainbow flag. It was first created as a symbol of LGBT+ pride in 1978 in San Francisco by a guy named Gilbert Baker, at the suggestion of Harvey Milk who was later martyred, and it has become one of the most recognisable flags in the world. The design was drawing on symbols and music of the hippie era, but it nevertheless angers many conservative Christians because they see it as coopting a biblical symbol of God's covenant with the world. And in particular they see it as coopting that biblical symbol to promote something they regard as thoroughly sinful.

Tonight, we heard the story from Genesis in which the rainbow is first identified as a symbol of God's covenant. This also happens to be the first Sunday in the Season of Lent, a season during which churches, even this one, get a bit more sombre than usual and give more attention to our entanglement in sin and to the pathways of repentance. So I figured that if I was going to preach on this ancient rainbow story, I couldn't avoid the questions about the contemporary queer use of the same symbol. But then, as I began to think about it, I came to the conclusion that, although the ancient and contemporary uses have no direct historical relationship to each other, they perhaps have more in common than I had first imagined.

The story we heard from the book of Genesis was, as you heard, the conclusion of the story of Noah's Ark and the great flood, and in order to make much sense of it we really need to take into account the whole of that story. The bare bones of the story, as we have it in our Bibles, is that God, completely disgusted by the corruption and evil of the world's population, decided to wipe it out with a giant flood, and to make a fresh start with one righteous man, Noah and his family. So on God's command, Noah builds an ark – a giant lifeboat – in which his family and a whole menagerie of animals survive the flood that wipes out all other life on earth. Then at the end of the story, God promises to never wipe out all life again, and sets a rainbow in the sky as a sign of this promise.

But like most stories in the Bible, when we dig a little deeper, all sorts of interesting questions and ideas emerge. The ones that many Christians angst over the most are “Did it really happen?” and “Can we prove it?” Ultimately, these are probably the least interesting and definitely the least useful. Absolutely nothing about our endeavours to faithfully follow the teachings and example of Jesus would be changed by proving one way or the other the historical reality of the Noah's Ark story. But there are lots of other things about this story that certainly have an impact on our understanding of Jesus and his way.

One of the things that was central to the teachings of Jesus was his endeavour to change the ways we think about God. He wants us to stop thinking of God as an angry judge who is just waiting to unleash a flood of destructive fury on the world if we stuff up. And the Noah's Ark story is saying something very similar, albeit by saying, “Well, maybe God used to be like that

in the ancient past, but God has changed. God has promised never to do anything like that ever again.”

Now there are two ways of understanding this. One is to take it fairly literally, at face value, and that is to say that God is evolving; that God tried a particular approach to dealing with human evil and, as a result of that attempt, has repented and sworn to never do that again. That is what the text literally says, but of course most of the people who are very concerned to emphasise believing the literal truth of everything the Bible says are people who would not accept the idea that God ever changes.

The other alternative is to say that God has never been an angry destructive God, but that we humans have mostly misunderstood God and that our Bible frequently reflects our past misunderstandings. Of course, that option is also not very palatable to those who long for an infallible Bible, but it is difficult to see where else you can go.

I don't know that it matters too much which of those two approaches you take, because they both end up in much the same place, just by slightly different routes. I'm going to focus initially on the first one, focussing on what the text actually says, but I will come back to the other one as well.

If you think about what this story is teaching us, the focus is not actually on Noah and the animals, or even on the flood. The focus is on God and on how God engages with the world. And in particular, the focus is on a change in the way God engages with the world. Up to and including this story (and remember we are only in the sixth chapter of the first book of the Bible when this story begins); up to here, God has been portrayed as responding to the world's evil and violence by trying to control it with an escalating series of violent punishments. But the only result has been that human violence has continued to escalate.

The first time a figure is put on this escalation is when Cain is banished after killing his brother Abel, and the Lord seeks to deter further vengeance by promising that anyone who kills Cain “will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” But a few verses and a few generations later, we have a man called Lamech who similarly kills another man and issues the blood-curdling threat that “if Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”

Then as the story of Noah and the flood begins, we have God escalating the response up to the level of a devastating flood over the entire earth to wipe out all life except for those taken on board Noah's lifeboat. But as the story ends in the extract we heard read tonight, God says to Noah, “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.” And indeed just two verses before tonight's extract, we read that God gave a new law that radically de-escalated the cycle of vengeance back down to one life for one life (Genesis 9:6), or what later became known as an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Of course, Jesus pushed the de-escalation even further, but that's a much later story.

Now if we accept the premise of the rainbow story that this is a repentance on God's part, a clear change of thinking and behaviour, then the implication is that God has learned by experience and observation that trying to control human violence by the application of even greater violence does not work. In fact it seems to do the opposite, provoking even greater

violence. And so God, repents and swears off this failed approach. And the rainbow is the sign of that promise.

Now, as I have already said, it is an open question whether the reality behind this story is actually God changing, or just our perception and understanding of God changing, but we will continue to stick with the story as it is told for now. So, if God changes, as the story says, and we are followers of God, then we are to follow this example too, this example of repentance and change in the face of experience that enables us to see the need for change.

Interestingly, towards the end of last year, Pope Francis issued a document that revises the official approach to theology for the Roman Catholic Church, and in it he called for Catholic theology to become “fundamentally contextual” and to utilise “lived experience” as a key source for theology. This is an enormous change for Catholic theology which has previously tended to say that the only sources for theology were scripture, tradition and reason. But to say that lived experience is to be seen as a source too is surely to follow in the footsteps of God as described in this story. God sees that the lived experience of seeking to control violence by the application of even greater violence shows this course of action to be wrong, so God changes. Read the rainbow. That’s God’s signature on the commitment to change.

But of course, the use of lived experience as a key source for theology doesn’t stop with the issue of violence and retribution. And this is where I pivot back to my opening comments about the contemporary rainbow flag.

Once we have biblical evidence of God endorsing a change in our theological understanding on the basis of lived experience, it become not only possible but often necessary to ask similar questions of lots of other things. Conserving the ways we’ve always understood things and done things is no longer a sufficient basis to defend our theological inflexibility.

So yes, it is true that the overwhelming majority of Christian leaders and theologians down through the centuries have regarded all sex outside of heterosexual marriage as sinful. And seen from the perspective of a conservative desire to hold onto that teaching as unchangeable, yes, it is understandable that such people object to the use of the rainbow, God’s signature, as a symbol of pride and support for the LGBTIQ+ community.

But if the rainbow is God’s signature on a radical change of perspective and action, then isn’t it entirely possible that God might be signing off on another radical change?

Lived experience tells us pretty clearly that traditional Christian prohibitions of homosexuality have not borne good fruit. So-called conversion therapies do not work, and instead cause horrific psychological damage. The demonising of same-sex relationships has not made them go away, but instead has put them under the sort of shame and stress that very few relationships can survive. From whatever angle you look at it, Christian hostility to LGBT+ people has proven itself to have the exact opposite impact to what the presence of Jesus always had on people. It has simply proven itself ineffective and overwhelmingly harmful. This is exactly the sort of outcomes we see leading God to repent and change in the Genesis story of Noah’s flood.

Now, once again, I want to reiterate that I’m not at all convinced that God used to be angry and vengeful, but then changed. I think it is much more likely that stories such as this one of

the rainbow in the time of Noah were shaped and told to explain a change that was actually occurring in us, rather than in God, as we began to see that violent punishment was not God's style at all, but was something of our own image that we were projecting onto God. But whichever way we read it, we end up in more or less the same place, with a God who leads us to renounce our own hunger for retribution and follow Jesus into the path of unconditional and undeserved love.

Similarly, if we ask our questions under the rainbow flag, it seems to me more likely that rather than God changing, Jesus is leading us to change and to recognise that God's love is far broader than we ever imagined, and that many of the people we sought to demonise and expel because we thought God hated them were not hated by God at all, but that that hatred was our own and we were projecting it onto God. God is probably a whole lot more comfortable than many of us Christians with the association of rainbow flags with God's own signature on the covenant of love and joy and wholeness

As we journey into this season of Lent, we are called to slow down and examine ourselves and see what God would have us repent of and change. And in this story, right in the first pages of our Bible, we are reminded that even our basic understandings of God might need to change, either because they were always wrong, or perhaps even, if you want to read the story more literally, because God changes. And it reminds us too that just because you can find some verses that justify some prejudice or hostility that you hold, that doesn't mean that God might not be calling you to repent of them and change.

And finally, it reminds us of the importance of lived experience in judging these things. If experience tells us that one pathway is generating lies and shame and breakdown and suicide, then it is clearly not Jesus-like, and we need to repent of it. But if a pathway is liberating people and leading them into the wide open spaces of God's love and joy and creativity and hope, then it is of God and is to be pursued. May this season of Lent set our feet on just such pathways in the footsteps of Jesus.