

A Bow in the Clouds

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that as the Scriptures are read
and your Word is proclaimed,
we may hear with joy
your word of hope to us today.
Amen.

Background

Noah, the Ark, and the Flood teach us about God's justice, mercy, and grace. With God, new hope can emerge out of disaster.

We're also reminded of one of the grand themes of Genesis: *God's persistent relationship with his creation*. God is determined to bless us—despite our betrayals and rebellion—and to challenge us to live into the life that he's designed for us in his wisdom.

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17 (NRSVue)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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." ¹² 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷ 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."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*



Immanuel Presbyterian Church, 2022

SERMON – "A Bow in the Clouds"

I've got a little pop quiz for us this morning.

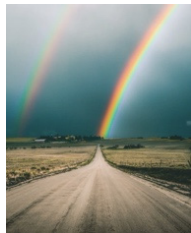
1. In our story, how many days and nights did it rain when Noah was in the ark with his family and the animals? **40.**

2. How many years was Moses a shepherd in the wilderness before God appeared to him in the burning bush? **40.**
3. How many years did Israel wander in the desert? **40.**
4. How many days straight did Goliath taunt Israel before young David challenged him with his slingshot? **40.**
5. How many days and nights was Jesus tempted in the wilderness after his baptism? **40.**
6. How many days of Lent are there? **40.**

You can see there's a theme here with 40. It's symbolic for a time or season of spiritual testing and challenge. It doesn't have to be literally 40 days. It's a long time, more than a few days or a couple of weeks, but it's not forever. Whenever you see "40 days" in the Bible, you know it's a time of being stretched and being uncomfortable. But it's also a season infused with hope.

Forty Days isn't forever—there's a beginning and an end. There's a purpose to this set time—to grow you. Facing and enduring adversity has a way of growing us like nothing else can.

So this season of Lent, this upcoming season of having an interim pastor, is a 40-day challenge for us. And God promises to be with us in our wilderness time and to grow us through it. Our faith is matured in these forty days. We learn to depend on God in new ways. We have the hope of Easter, but let's not fast forward the gift of the forty days of Lent.



One of my favorite viral YouTube videos was from a number of years ago called "**double rainbow.**" The guy on the double rainbow video *really, really* liked a double rainbow he stumbled upon at Yosemite. Well, I'm a bit of a rainbow hunter myself. Whenever it's raining and some sun is shining, I scan the horizon for a rainbow. In fact, here's my reaction and recreation of a double-rainbow encounter right here in Tucson.

For us believers, the rainbow has much meaning, and it's spelled out in our morning's passage. But we do need to backtrack a little first. Things haven't been going so well since God created the world. In the last couple of chapters in Genesis we hear that wickedness has gone viral on the earth. There was a moral breakdown in society as a whole. It wasn't contained to just individuals—like Adam, Eve, and Cain. Here we see the devastating effects of the Fall on a corporate level, ten generations after Adam.

Evidently there *never really were any good old days*. Not in the 1950's. Not in Noah's day. Not now. The flood is God's undoing and reversal of a creation gone amuck. So God's sorry that he's made humankind. Like a saddened parent, God is grieved and heartbroken. Some translations say God *repented* of creating the earth. His discipline strategy? Blot everyone out and start over with a flood. Sort of God's "take two" or "redo" of creation.

Yet there was **one person** who stood out—**Noah**. According to the Bible, Noah was the first person born after Adam’s death. He’s almost like an Adam Part 2 in God’s plan for a new creation. Noah found favor with God. He was *different* because he walked with God—rather than walking in the ways of evil. And God noticed.

Again we see that HOW we live in this life *matters*. And it’s vitally important that we live God’s way—not just how we see fit.

So the Lord provided for Noah and his family by giving instructions to build an ark.

It was to be:

450 feet long.	No rudder.
75 feet wide.	No sails.
45 feet high.	No compass.

God was the pilot.

This is the key: *Who’s the captain of your ark?*

It’s interesting that the same word “*ark*” is used in Exodus for *the basket* that baby Moses was put in when he was put into the Nile River to escape being killed by Egypt. Noah’s Ark and Moses’ Ark are God’s provision and deliverance from danger.

Noah, his extended family, male and female of all the animals (7 pairs of the ritually clean animals), and food rations for all of them were brought in. Then God shut the door—sealing the fate of the world and the survival of all passengers of the ark.

Then the rains came. For **40 days and 40 nights**. Like the **wind of God** hovering over the waters in Genesis 1 before creation, another wind from God was sent after 40 days of rain to make the floodwaters recede in this creation redo. So after **40 days**, **God stopped the rain**. And we hear these wonderful words:

“God REMEMBERED Noah.”

After sending out a raven and a dove, Noah knew it was safe to disembark from the ark. Noah built an altar to God giving thanks and praise for surviving. God smelled the pleasing *BBQ* wafting to heaven. Then God spoke.

Judgment was over. **Mercy** would be the last word.

No longer would the Lord curse the ground that He cursed two times previously in Genesis. The cycle of seasons would be restored. God affirmed the sanctity of human life because male and female are created in the divine image—we’re God’s representatives on earth. We honor God when we treat one another with dignity.

The **Lord** made a **covenant with Noah**—blessing Noah and his family. Like Adam, Noah and his sons were commanded to be fruitful and multiply. God set a covenant with his creation. Just like he set a bow in the clouds. A covenant isn’t like a bargain or contract with equals. There can be no amendments or revisions of a covenant. We can’t barter or lobby for a covenant. We have no say—but we’re called and empowered by God to live by the covenant God activates.

God's covenant with Noah is for everybody—the WHOLE world. No one is left out. Even the animals can count on this one. God cares about all of his creation. God will never again deal with us as we deserve. Rather, he chooses to generously shower us with Christ's living water for eternity. We're marked by the waters of baptism, not *flood waters*. God not only *establishes* this covenant, but he *remembers* it. God won't back out AND God has our back.

The Hebrew word for "*bow*" that is used here also has the meaning of a *bow and arrow*. God was basically saying that he's no longer to be remembered as the *God of the Flood*—the *angry God with a bow and arrow*. God is now to be understood as the God of Baptism—using a *different bow*—a bow in the clouds—a rainbow for peace. It is there to remind him of his promises.



I like how the poet Wordsworth puts it:

*The bow in the hands of man
Was an instrument of battle.
The bow bent by the hand of God
Has become a symbol of peace.*

In other words, God beat his sword into a ploughshare.

Signs and symbols are powerful. A sign or symbol is an ordinary event or thing that God transforms into something special. Symbols are visual reminders of God's amazing love.

The rainbow—reminds us of God's promise of his grace.

The dove—peace and the Spirit's presence.

The ark—God is a refuge who preserves us in hard times.

The waters of baptism—we're washed, cleansed, and purified by God through Christ Jesus.

The cross—that death and evil have been defeated by Christ's death and resurrection.

The bread and the cup at the Lord's Table—Christ's sacrifice and deliverance from sin.

We need these reminders.

It's so easy for us to have spiritual amnesia. These tokens help jog our faith memory. They are pointers and cues—directing us back to God and what God has done for us. When we feel like we're drowning with no land or ark in sight, we hold on to God's promise:

"I WILL REMEMBER."

We all have our storms—some of us will have higher category storms than others, but don't forget—***GOD WILL REMEMBER US in the storm. GOD WILL BE WITH US in the storm.***

Sometimes we see the rainbow lining this side of heaven.

Sometimes we have to wait for it on the other side.

But God will not forget us.

"I will never leave you nor forsake you."

The good news is that there is actually one thing God forgets. The only thing that God forgets is our SINS. The record against us has been erased. Our sins have been washed away. Christ brings life out of death.

In gratitude, we give everything to God and follow the crucified and risen Christ, who was revealed in a bright cloud in his Transfiguration and in the book of Revelation where he is surrounded by—a *rainbow*.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Noah and the Rainbow" by Marc Chagall, 1961-1966

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