

This year, each of the Old Testament lessons for the Sundays in Lent tells us about a Covenant. Covenants spell out how a relationship will be lived out. The rainbow after the flood marks a covenant of God's care, given to the whole creation with no strings attached.

The rainbow marks the beginning of a series of covenants established by God. Next comes the covenant with Abraham, which laid a foundation for creating a People "blessed to be blessing." Then Moses and the covenant of the Ten Commandments, and when the people failed to keep that covenant, the prophet Jeremiah points toward yet another covenant, a New Covenant fulfilled by Jesus Christ, and extended to us in the covenant promises of our baptism.

Noah and his family were saved from the Flood— but soon they are swamped by sin again. Yet God hangs that rainbow up in the sky, in spite of the sordid mess that humans keep on making of this world. Noah didn't deserve God's promise of faithful care; and if we are paying any attention at all, we know that humans continue to make a mess of things. If we are truly honest, we know *we* don't deserve God's patient forgiveness either. The Bible shows us that even the best people have tragic flaws. Yet God manages—flaws and all—to find ways to keep on caring for the world.

There's a wonderful story about a Water Bearer in India who had two large pots; each hung on the end of a pole, which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot always arrived only half full.

For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, for it never failed to carry out the precise purpose for which it was created. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only *half* of what it had been made to do. After *two years* of what it perceived to be bitter failure, the pot spoke to the Water Bearer one day by the stream.

"I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"For these past two years, I have been able to deliver only *half* my load because this crack causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said. The Water Bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion, he answered, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot paid attention to the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, *you’ve watered them*. For two years, I’ve been able to pick these beautiful flowers for my master’s table. You didn’t know it, but *without you* he would have missed out on this beauty.”

Well, you might say we’re all cracked pots, and we live in a “cracked-pot” world. Because we can make our own choices, sometimes we—or others around us-- make bad choices, and we live caught up into the effects of a web of tragic choices. Relying only on our *own* resources, we try to find ways to hide the flaws. We use the good gifts from God for self-promotion. Or, like the cracked pot, we may just hang around, ashamed and discouraged. But God can use our flaws. The Apostle Paul said it this way: “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power *belongs to God* and does not come from us.” (2 Cor. 4:6a-7) The treasure is the good news of God’s good will for us in Jesus; we’re the clay jars—breakable, cracked, maybe even broken to ragged pieces of grief, confusion or regret—but capable of spreading God’s love if, as we live out our Baptismal covenant, we share our gifts in service to God and our neighbor.

To redeem our broken selves, Jesus came among us, a fragile human. Still dripping from his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus begins his ministry with the heavenly blessing still ringing in his ears: “*with you I am well pleased.*” But *first* God does what may seem to us to be a shocking thing. Jesus doesn’t just *happen to wander* into the wilderness. Mark tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus into the chaos, into the flood of temptation, to be with the wild beasts in the lonely wilderness places of life. Mark’s telling of the story doesn’t go into details about what happened there, but it’s not hard to imagine it. Evil *continues* to work hard at tempting us and convincing us that somehow evil is *actually* good, or at least *better* or more *powerful* than the good, or maybe just *inevitable*.

God acts through the struggles that we face, within them; our Lord walks with us in the wilderness times. For though we face *our* wild beasts, even though we may BE the wild beasts sometimes, the angels also wait *on* us and wait *for* us. The Spirit still works here among God’s people. We learn again and again that God’s grace is made perfect in us when we are *in control the least*, and need to *trust God faithful care the most*.

In a fearful world, we don’t need to be afraid that God will give up on us. In his trials and temptations, Jesus never let go of God, because he trusted that God would never let go of him. *We* may give up on ourselves. We may lose hope that peace on earth will ever take hold. We may be frustrated that the promised reign of God eludes us, that one that Jesus says is near; truth and compassion have been hijacked and held for ransom. But God’s promises remain.

Humans can manage to do a lot of damage, and we will continue to live in a world massively flawed by the effects of sin. But in Christ, we have been freed to pass along the love we have received, working together as the hands of Christ, tending to God’s vision of quality of life for people and all living things, as in that rainbow covenant.

The rainbow says it all. After the rain, after the storm, amid foolishness and frustration, God's promise forever appears and reappears. We can be God's angels who minister in the wilderness, we can trust that Christ's promised love is at work through our own *woundedness* and in our own *wilderness*.

The rainbow bends toward the cross, where we find God with open arms. God's loving grace is flowing, and God's care for all of creation is never-ending. This is the sign of the Covenant of care for us and all that lives on the earth, reminding us that destruction isn't God's intention for us. The cross is enough to launch a new creation in us and through us, as we live into the covenant of our Baptism. Seeking to follow Jesus faithfully, we have the Holy Spirit's promised help resisting the daily temptations to turn away from God and tend only to ourselves. Through trusting Jesus, crucified and risen for the life of the world, we take in the good news of forgiveness and healing and hope.

The remarkable thing about the story of Noah is not the *flood*, but the *promise* of the rainbow. God's steadfast love will not fail. We remember that God delivered God's people from Egypt, brought them through the desert, and led them into the Promised Land. God's people remember the times when God was there, bringing *us* through the waters of chaos to new life. God will never give up on us! God's love is the ark bearing us up, carrying us forward in the flood. God care is a rainbow in the wilderness enabling us to endure, trusting the transforming power of self-giving love that is ours through the cross of Christ. That is ours to share.