

John Sampson
"The Rainbow Covenant"
Text: Genesis 9:8 - 17
Preached at KVCC
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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer.

Another mass shooting.

On this first Sunday in our season of Lent we come to worship under the shadow of 17 adults and children having been gunned down at their school in Parkland, FL.

I hadn't seen the news before we celebrated our Ash Wednesday service later that same evening.

I didn't know as we came together in the dark of the night, as we marked ourselves with ashes that signified our mortality, and our desire for repentance, that a man, not much more than I child himself, had come to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School just as the kids were being dismissed, entered the building carrying a semiautomatic rifle, and began shooting.

It's only after the service, with my forehead marked with a sign of the cross, sitting in front of my TV, that I learned what had happened.

I watched as a senator from CT gave his thoughts and prayers to the victims and families touched by the horror in Florida because not too many years ago Sandy Hook, CT had been touched by a similar event when a man entered a school and shot and killed 20 children.

It was less than an hour after I had shared my belief that the story of the final days of Jesus is our story. That in the events of those final days, in Jesus' abandonment by his friends and family, in his loneliness as his body is broken by others, in his final moments hanging on the cross, in his desperate plea to God not to forsake him, we can see resonances with our own lives.

It was less than an hour from when I said these things that I was watching a young woman describe the terror and confusion, the broken bodies, and the desperate pleas for help that surrounded her as she tried to escape from her high school, as she ran to save her own life.

You see the season of Lent is a season in which we acknowledge our brokenness, a season when we look directly at the ways we fail one another, when we give voice to the moments when we fail to accept

God's invitation to lives filled with greater compassion, and with deeper love for one another.

Lent is not a museum that curates ancient artifacts, and calls us to perform dry and dusty rituals. It is the road we travel today – it is truth of what happened in Parkland, FL.

It is found in the rage and the hurt and the desperation of men, young men, who can only feel a sense of achievement, and of catharsis through murder, through the murder of innocent people.

The truth of Lent is contained in the truly unanswerable question of why the innocent are not spared. The truth of Lent is contained in the fact that our nation experiences mass shooting after mass shooting and doesn't seem to have the courage and vision to make the fundamental changes needed to stop the murder of our friends, and neighbors and children.

On Wednesday the season of Lent was ushered in here in this room through a ancient ritual of marking our body with ashes.

On Wednesday the season of Lent was ushered in with another senseless mass shooting, this time at a school in a town called Parkland.

But hear these other names. Hear this litany of communities touched by senseless death:

Las Vegas

Orlando

Virginia Tech

Sandy Hook

Sutherland Springs

San Bernadino

Binghamton

Fort Hood

Columbine

Aurora

Umpqua Community College

And these are only a few of the names on a much larger list.

Hearing community after community named, experiencing another shooting this week, seeing no meaningful response or plan to avert another shooting on the horizon, is this our future? Are we condemned to walk this path of brokenness to the cross and remain there? Is there no hope for change?

Today we hear the story of God making a covenant with Noah, and his children, and with all humanity, and with the entire world. She tells us that after the flood the world will never be destroyed again. And the sign of this covenant will be the rainbow that appears in the

sky after each rainstorm. It's a beautiful image, and it's a reassuring promise that can bring us hope.

But there is an elephant in the room, isn't there?

There are a whole bunch of uneasy questions that hang in air like the smell of burnt toast.

Because wasn't it God herself who destroyed the earth? Who allowed not only all of humanity, but all animal and plant life to perish because of her unquenchable rage? And doesn't it seem that God's vengeance against humanity's failings was completely disproportionate to the crime?

How are we to reconcile the horror of God's flood, with her seemingly easy move to forgiveness and the possibility of a new future?

What I think bridges this gap between God's destruction of the world and her making a promise to humanity that it will never happen again is transformation.

Deep, meaningful, transformation that bears the fruit of reconciliation and relationship.

God allows herself to be transformed by the experience of the flood. You can see her changing her position as the floodwaters rise, and the body count increases. You can feel the altering within her as the waters subside and she looks across the earth and sees the devastation she has wrought. Confronted by the blood on her own hands, unable to fully process what she has done, God is transformed. And she chooses a new path, a path, which will never allow her to destroy the world again.

This story of the flood, and the internal change God experiences, is a very different understanding of God than one we may hold within our own beliefs about who God is, and how she works in our world.

There is a long tradition that sees God as unchanging. To use Aristotle's words we may see God as the unmoved mover. As a force that affects the movement and change of the universe, but doesn't participate in that same change herself.

This story of the flood and its aftermath shares with us a different perspective of God, an understanding that the Divine can be moved by horror, that she can change in the face of her own complicity in acts of destruction and chaos. That after participating in horrible events she can disavow them, and work towards protecting and engendering new life throughout the world.

This message of the possibility of transformation in the face of destruction and death is fundamental to our journey of Lent. It is the hope that is still present even in the face of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School this past Wednesday.

For if even God, the unmoved mover can be moved by the experience of mass death, then can't we also as individuals, and as a nation?

In the face of all of the names of the communities I shared earlier, the ones that have suffered their own tragedies of mass shootings, can't our hearts also be moved, can't our laws be moved, can't our commitment to mental healthcare be moved, can't our numbness and apathy be moved, can't our belief in the disposability of human life be moved?

Instead of accepting a future of more shootings, and more death, and the loss of more children as simply a fact of 21st century America, can we not be moved to make a covenant with our children, and with each other, that we will not allow further death? Can'y our future be different from our past?

In this journey of Lent, in this journey through the brokenness of America, let us stop for a moment, and instead of looking forward, let us look above us. And we may not see anything at first, but if we look with eyes transformed by hope, we can see radiating above us a rainbow.

Up above us, even in the wake of Parkland, shines that many-colored unbreakable symbol of life, and the brilliant possibility of transformation.

But we will not be able to reach it, if we do not work for it.

When we hear stories of God where she promises humanity something, stories like the one we heard this morning, we can believe that God will take action, and that we need only sit back passively and receive her blessings. That when she tells us that we as a people will be saved from death, that we need not do anything and it will happen just as she promised us.

But looking into the face of evil, of children gunned down by young men possessed by their own demons of rage and futility, can we take these stories of our traditions at face value?

And can we believe God's promises of fruitful life as the casualties in our schools, and across our nation, pile up?

There is a story that comes to us from the Jewish tradition. It's a story about a conversation Noah has with God when he exits the ark

with all of the animals. It's a story that the tradition added to the Torah I think because the writers had experienced the horror of mass death, and they couldn't make any sense of it with only the biblical record. So they improvised and shared an insight they had gained during their lives.

Here's the story that they shared.

Noah exits the ark with his family and with all the animals after the waters of the Flood had receded. Looking around the destroyed world Noah says to God, "You are merciful, you should have shown mercy to those who lived here." And God is incensed. She responds, "What did you do when I told you of my plan. Did you argue with me? Did you plead with me to change my mind? Did you try to dissuade me in any way? No, you were just happy to hear that you were going to be saved."

This story from the Rabbis tells us that God doesn't desire our passive acceptance of how things are, even if they seem to come from the mouth of God herself. She doesn't wish us to take the violence of our lives as a given, as if they were their own dark law of nature. Rather, as her children, the Spirit of Love invites us to take responsibility and follow our own sense of morality into action. Confronted with mass shootings around the country this story that amends and extends the biblical story tells us that we should be actively trying to change God's mind, actively praying for God to end the horror of the shootings that take our children, and those we love. Faced with the ongoing horror of our nation's violence we should not passively accept this environment of killing as if it has a power we can never resist. Rather, this story from our Jewish brothers and sisters invites us to activate and advocate ourselves for change, and not be content that we, and our families, may be safe so far.

Because God created our world in goodness. She created her people in goodness. She meant our lives to be filled with goodness. Yes, in this Lenten season we do travel to the cross, we do engage with all of the brokenness of humanity that surrounds us and permeates our lives. But our journey does not stop there. It doesn't stop with the destruction of the world by a flood. It doesn't stop with the mass shooting this past Wednesday at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. It continues on to the glory of Easter, on to a future without gun violence, but only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be transformed along this journey, and become the agents of transformation living under the sign of the rainbow, having made the sign of the rainbow ours forever more.

Amen.