

The Rainbow

Genesis 9:8-17

I Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

The essential requirements to create a rainbow are, of course, rain and sunshine: tears and laughter.

In the story of Noah we have plenty of tears and laughter. The tears stem from the wickedness of humanity and the anger wreaked by God. It is, in some ways, a repeat of the story of Adam and Eve. The earlier story, however, ends bleakly: Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden and the man is condemned to have to sweat to grow his food and the woman is condemned to pain in childbirth. It is a story to explain why life is hard. The story of Noah does not end bleakly, and nor is it meant to explain why life is hard. There is laughter at the end.

The biblical story of the flood is not unique - there are several accounts have been found in Babylon of a great flood. We may suppose that they originate in memories of an historical flood which took place between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. The biblical writer finds in these historical events a theological meaning: the flood was the way that God cleansed the earth of great evil. At first he resolves to destroy every living creature - until he realizes there is one good man - Noah. And the world is saved by one, good man.

This is a new idea. This is a ray of hope whereas the story of Adam and Eve had little to lighten the gloom. The world can be saved by a good man.

This idea returns. It appears next in the time of Abraham, who was a migrant, wandering from place to place. God tells Abraham that he is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. But Abraham intervenes. 'But', he says, 'what if there are fifty good men in the city: won't you spare the city for the sake of the fifty?' God agrees. Abraham then speaks again: 'I am sorry to bother you and I know I should not speak - but what if there were only forty five good men? Would you destroy the city because they were five short?'

God agrees. Abraham persists in his war of attrition, this continual negotiation until God agrees that as long as there are ten good men he will not destroy the city. Sodom and Gomorrah are saved by ten good men,

The theme appears again in the Prophet Isaiah where a mysterious man we now as the Suffering Servant saves the whole nation not only by his goodness but because he suffers for the sins of all.

But of course the most significant manifestation of this theme of one good man saving the world is in Jesus Christ himself who like the suffering servant, bears the sins of many. Peter put it like this:

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
in order to bring you to God. 1 Peter 3:18

St Paul makes the connection between Christ and Adam quite clear:

for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:22

And we become in Christ through our baptism: we are cleaned in water just as the world was cleansed in water in the time of Noah. We discover it is all part of the same picture. We are back where we began.

So the rainbow is the sign of hope that we do not have in the story of Adam and Eve. It is the sign that God will never again seek to destroy the earth.

It has been a powerful symbol for men and women throughout the ages. For D H Lawrence it was enough to inspire a novel, about hope and aspiration. At the end, the author tells us that the heroine, the young Ursula Brangwen

saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven.

But for others that 'new world' is just a tantalizing vision, something they can never find. It is summed up in the idea that at the end of the rainbow there is a pot of gold - and we the end of the rainbow is never there.

In the case of Dorothy, in the Wizard of Oz, what lies at the end of the rainbow is a place where she can't get into trouble and she muses to her dog,

Some place where there isn't any trouble. Do you suppose there is such a place, Toto? There must be. It's not a place you can get to by a boat, or a train. It's far, far away. Behind the moon, beyond the rain...

which is the cue for a song

Somewhere over the rainbow way up high,
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.

Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true.

Someday I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me.
Where troubles melt like lemon drops
Away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me.

Somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly.
Birds fly over the rainbow.
Why then, oh why can't I?

If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow
Why, oh why can't I?

This is a profound theological question. How do I become part of that covenant with God symbolized by the rainbow? The Christian answer is simple: you become part of the Body of Christ. But that only leads to another question: how do I become part of the Body of Christ?

Perhaps that question is answered in the gospel reading. In this account of Jesus' baptism and temptation in the desert we see, squeezed into just a few verses, the process by which he moves from being an obscure provincial carpenter to being great teacher, preacher and healer. Three things happen: he is baptized; he is anointed with the spirit and he is tested to breaking point. And at the end of all that he is ready to proclaim the Good News.

And that is our story too. We are baptized, we are confirmed and then we are tested in ways that are unique to us. We are baptized only once; we are confirmed only once; but the process of repentance, forgiveness and being filled with the spirit is a kind of cycle, for even when we are forgiven we fail again and we need forgiving again. But that does not mean we end up where we began: the Christian life can be like a series of loops - a few steps forward and a few back but the general line is forwards as we become more like Christ.

And we should note that as soon as Jesus has experienced the spiritual high he is sent off into the desert by the spirit. He needs to be alone to reflect, to pray. He did not go there in order to be tempted by the devil. But that was what Satan chose. Satan had no desire that Jesus should draw closer to his father; and Satan has no desire that we should draw closer to Jesus. In fact he will do anything to prevent it. And, in so far as we use Lent to grow spiritually, we can be sure that Satan will put obstacles in our path. He will encourage bickering and falling out in congregations; he will foster bitterness and lethargy in individuals. He will do anything to prevent us drawing closer to Christ.

So be on your guard this Lent. Follow the advice of St Peter:

Discipline yourselves, keep alert.
Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around,
looking for someone to devour.
Resist him, steadfast in your faith,

1 Peter 5:8-9

Keep your eyes on the Risen Christ. Keep your eyes on the Rainbow.

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