

Consider the rainbow. The New Age Movement used it as a symbol of a bridge to a new world. The popular song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" carries similar feelings in its dream of a happier place to live. In recent years, the rainbow has been adopted as a symbol for sexual diversity and gay rights. But from the beginning of creation, a rainbow was the sign that followed heavy rain, and had an even deeper meaning as we learned first in our Sunday School classes when we read the story of Noah and a great flood. That rainbow, like the cross for Christians, has been an important symbol for people of faith.

Now, consider the promises we make. Some are made casually, while some are forced or agreed to under duress. Often promises are made with all the passion and sincerity we can muster, and sometimes they are like a get out of jail free card. Consider all the promises of our lifetime. As kids we promised not to hit brother or sister again. (Right!) In high school, promise rings were the rage and a sign of a commitment (unless someone more appealing came along.) We promise to pay back loans, to visit a friend, to exercise, and to take care of family.

My focus now is on the rainbow God creates, the promises God makes, and how that might have an effect on how we wander through the sunshine and storms of life. We all have good intentions, or we would never make promises. At the same time, the reality of an imperfect world is that promises can be broken, forgotten, or ignored. It is that confusing conflict of broken promises and promises we refuse to make that God acts.

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Genesis tells how once upon a time, with a raging storm more powerful than all of the hurricanes and typhoons ever, the earth was covered by a blanket of trillions of tons of water, and much of life was destroyed. When the storm finally ceased, and the sun was visible for the first time in months, a rainbow announced the miracle of the beginning of a new creation. There is a wonderful reason the Church has chosen this text to read at the beginning of the season of Lent.

During Lent we prepare for different type of flood at Calvary as Jesus' blood would be poured out for all the world to see. He would empty himself so that we might be filled full in the power of Easter morning. Just as Noah was locked in the ark, Jesus was surrounded by death in the darkness of the tomb. And just as the living emerged from the ark after the storm, Jesus departed the tomb and Easter's glow became a prism of love to celebrate the promise and remind us that death would never destroy us again.

The raging flood which pounded Noah's boat was no different than the jealousy that turned Cain into the first murderer, or broken promises that litter our living. The dark destructive flood of Noah's day was no different than the clouds, thunder, and lightning of Good Friday. And the lives confined in the darkness of that ark were no different than Jesus' stay in the "womb of a tomb" as he prepared to open the door to that first Easter.

Because we are promise breakers and God is guided by love rather than a need for revenge, He continues to intervene and do for us what we are incapable of doing for Him, ourselves, and each other. The story of a rainbow is the story of God's tears, washing the

earth with disappointment and then shining brightly in a brand-new day. But the rainbow was only a sign of things yet to come!

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In a hectic, fast paced beginning to his Gospel, Mark shares three brief stories. Jesus was baptized by John, He was tempted in the desert, and John was arrested.

The Gospel moves from the refreshing waters of the Jordan to the absolute dryness of the desert, and finally to the filth of a prison from which John would never leave. It starts so fresh and clean, and it ends down and dirty. How can this introduce good news? it just doesn't make sense, does it? Or maybe it does, as Jesus re-entered a world so flooded by sin that it literally had become a desert. Mark follows the dripping footprints of Jesus from river to desert, as John is thrown into the darkness of a prison. John began as the star attraction but was confined in a dark cell. From spotlight to darkness, success to struggle, life to death; it sounds much like the story we find ourselves living!

Long ago, after a mighty Flood, wind blew the waters away and a renewed earth reappeared. The remaining moisture that had ravaged the earth was lifted up into the sky and the bright and warm sun of a new world reflected through that remnant of the flood waters and a spectrum of colors appeared. And flood water became a rainbow!

At the right time, emerging from the waters of the Jordan, Jesus stepped onto dry land to begin a perfect attempt at new creation. The promise of the rainbow was fulfilled.

Like Joseph's coat of many colors that announced a Father's love, the reds, oranges, blues and green of a rainbow paint the contour of the heavens from earth to sky and back to earth again. More than that, the dazzling colors became a sign of a promise of love!

On Christmas Eve the sky again was filled with light, which reached the peak of its brilliance on Easter when an empty cross of death became a beacon of light for people of every time and place, of every nation and color.

How often do kids wash their hands only to run right back outside into the dirt? What is it like to put a clean tablecloth out only to spill gravy as soon as you sit down? Isn't it frustrating when you start the day off by spilling coffee on a clean shirt? Do you ever wonder why we spend so much time cleaning things that are only going to get dirty again? Sometimes, it just doesn't seem worth the effort!

That is the essence of the Gospel. We live with a concept that we clean up because we shouldn't be dirty. Jesus lives with the loving mission that he will get himself dirty, because none of us can stay clean.

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Jesus stood in the waters of the River, not to be made clean – but to proclaim God in our midst. He came to follow the same path we journey ... into temptation and away from God's will for our lives.

This wash cycle is the journey of Lent. For 40 days we follow Jesus who was deserving of life on the sun-drenched mountain, he chose instead to live with real people who are

dirtied by sin and can't escape death. For 40 days we remember a flood so that we more fully celebrate the dazzling joy of an empty tomb as Jesus lit up the world with his love!

Every time rains falls, lightning rages, winds howl, and clouds darken there will also come a time when the bright colors of the rainbow will announce that *love is greater than pain and life will always trump death!* No matter how many broken promises are gathered under the reflective shades of the rainbow, God's Promise will always be kept, and his love will be new every day! No longer living with shades of gray, we are in the Technicolor of a dazzling, new, creative Love!

The ark that carried the faithful through 40 nights of death and destruction was no different than Mary's womb that brought Jesus as a flash of joy into a broken world. And isn't baptism like a flood that not only drowns what is evil, washes what has been soiled, and lifts us up on the waves of God's powerful surge of love?

Dolly Parton remarked, "The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain." The way God says it is, if you want to see Easter you have to go through Good Friday. What a rainbow kind of love we have, that no matter what storms may bring; God has been there already, will dry up the waters, and will carry us safely home!

Why clean up just to get dirty again? The real question is why wallow in or fear the mud, when Jesus has done so to make us clean? We fear the pain of this life, and Jesus embraces it so that we know he will refresh and renew us.

Like Noah's 40-day family excursion in a flood, we gather for our forty-day journey called Lent. To remember how God rescues and to celebrate his promise that we never need fear death or life again! All of that, and more, is wrapped up in the love of Calvary's cross, and the dazzling brilliance of a tomb filled with Easter's light. And, as every rainbow proclaims ... no matter how muddy the waters, and no matter how dark the clouds, it is God's dazzling light that will always restore. Take part in this powerful journey.

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