

Sunday February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Lent I

Genesis 9:8-17 and 1Peter 3:18-22

“Right to the Point”

If there is one thing I know; when all else fails in our conversations, we can always talk about the weather. In fact, isn't it odd that we talk about the weather so often, but no one ever does anything about it. Although Shirley Cookson found a sign one time to post that read, “Whoever is praying for snow, please stop.” I have learned a great deal about weather, and what causes it, mainly due to a certain love of my life who is a weather forecast fan.

Words like “polar vortex” and “tornadic activity”, “isobars” and “wind shear” now have meaning for me. Ever notice how when there is a hurricane or bad blizzard, they always send some reporter out into the awful weather to be blown around, all the while telling us not to go out in the weather. How low on the totem pole do you have to be to get that assignment? Recently, they explained that if you go outside, and there are coins falling from the sky, you know you are in for some “change” in the weather.

They also reported that it might rain cats and dogs, but if you see chickens and ducks raining down, you are in for some “fowl” weather. Oh, please just one more. Have you heard about the pilot who was taking his final flight exam and flew through a rainbow? His instructor said he “passed with flying colours”. Yet, probably nothing unsettles us in terms of weather like a good old, house shaking, thunderstorm, such as the following story indicates.

One summer evening during a violent thunderstorm a mother was tucking her small boy into bed. She was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremor in his voice, "Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?" The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. "I can't dear," she said. "I have to sleep in Daddy's room." A long silence was broken at last by a shaken little voice saying, “The big sissy!”

Thunderstorms can be terrifying, especially those ones we experience at the height of summer. I bet we all have experienced one of those days, and maybe we are longing for them this week, when the temperature hits near 30 centigrade or beyond. The humidity is beyond stifling, so much so, that your clothes stick to you, and being out of air-conditioning is unbearable. There is also no respite from even the slightest breeze. As the day progresses, you know from experience to look to the western sky, and look for what?

Those big, dark, thick clouds, rolling in at a pretty good clip. Then you hear it. The faintest of rumbles, and you know you had better get under cover. So, you sit near a window, but not too close, and the thunder gets louder, and lightning streaks across the sky. The wind begins to roar. Then it comes, maybe preceded by some hail, but nonetheless, the rain comes in a torrent. The streets become large ponds; storm drains get overwhelmed. You can even smell the rain.

It rains so hard that you can hardly see across the street. All you can say is “wow, what a show”! Then almost as quickly as it came, the rain slows, and eventually stops all together. The clouds clear out, and the sun shines again. The humidity has broken, at least for now, and the air feels fresher. You feel better, and then you see it. In fact, you had hoped to see one after such a storm. There it is, bright and beautiful; the aforementioned rainbow.

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It's a wonder to behold. We are even a bit excited, and call anyone nearby to come and look. There is just something about the sight of a rainbow, isn't there. I would go so far as to say that I have never met anyone who disliked a rainbow or did not think it was something special. I know the physics of light dispersal that is behind the visual treat, but I can't help myself from feeling that rainbows are a bit magical. No wonder my Irish ancestors tied leprechauns to the phenomena, always looking for the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

The rainbow signifies that the worst is over. A sense of wellbeing floods over us. No wonder the rainbow is a symbol of hope. And if anyone needed a sign of hope it was Noah. Even if you do not take the story literally, you've got to admit it is a powerful experience. Imagine the terror of his little cruise. The faith level he had to mount. Build an ark with not a cloud in the sky, fill it with two of every kind of animal, get in, and shut the doors.

Then it rained and flooded for forty days and nights. You think your kids get squirrely after a couple of days inside. Noah must have wondered if he would ever see the sun again.

But even after it stopped raining, it took over ten months for the water to abate enough for Noah to send out the raven and then two weeks later finally the dove does not return. Imagine, holding up with your family until late November of this year. All this to wipe the slate clean. I can imagine that Noah, and his family, probably thought they would die on that boat. Noah finally emerges from the ark and is uncertain. What now? He knew he couldn't take another calamity.

So, Noah turns to God, and offers a sacrifice, and prays, and God comes and make a covenant, a promise with Noah. God promises to never again, flood the earth to wipe it clean, despite how much we might long for some good ole scrubbing. And as a sign of that covenant, that promise, God set in the sky a rainbow. So, every time a storm blew in, and Noah wondered if he should have kept the ark in good repair, God reminds him of his promise by way of a rainbow.

God says that he placed the rainbow to remind himself of the covenant. Kind of like putting a post-it note on our fridge. So, every time we see a rainbow after a storm, we share in the promise made to Noah. A powerful story, one of the first ever taught to me in Sunday School. So, it really isn't surprising that Peter takes it as a metaphor and includes it in one of the most difficult passages of scripture to understand.

It is a bit confusing, but essentially what Peter is writing is that Noah and his family were saved from a sure death. Without the ark, and God's protection, they would have perished with everyone else. He goes on to say that just like eight individuals were saved from a sure death, we have been saved from a sure death by Christ's sacrifice on the cross at Calvary. And just as the rainbow was a sign of the covenant with Noah, our baptisms are a sign of the new covenant.

Peter is going as far as to say that the two symbols are linked. Both are symbols of hope. Both are symbols of God's redeeming work. But here is the most difficult thing to hear from Peter. Yes, you have been saved from certain death, but your salvation does not exempt you from suffering, just as Noah suffered on the ark. In fact, in the verses before our text today, it seems to indicate that as Christ's people, we will suffer, and will do so even when we do good.

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These are words we would perhaps not like to hear, but we know them to be true, every time we see a rainbow. After all, there could never be a rainbow without a storm proceeding it. There was no rainbow without the flood. There can be no resurrection, without Christ's death on the cross. Peter tells us not to fear what the world fears (vs.14) and we are not to be intimidated by life. You will suffer, Peter says, but do so with a clear conscience.

I came across something powerful from Gary Inrig's, *A Call to Excellence*, (Victor Books, a division of SP Publ., Wheaton, Ill; 1985, p. 119)

*At the end of a tour of the United States in 1963, Helmut Thielicke, the distinguished German preacher-theologian, was interviewed by a group of journalists and theological students.*

*One of those present at the press conference asked Thielicke what he considered to be the most important question of that time for Americans.*

*His carefully measured answer is just as relevant now as it was then, particularly in a discussion of excellence: I would rather; if you will permit me to make a judgment; mention an entirely different problem as being the most important question which you are facing. Not a single person ever raised it in any discussion I had in this country (it would therefore appear that people are astonishingly unconscious of it); and whenever I raised it myself, it seemed to evoke a kind of disconcerted amazement, I might almost say, a kind of embarrassment, which was probably the reason why nobody ever broached the subject.*

*I mean the question of how Americans deal with suffering. Yes, you have heard aright; I mean the problem of suffering. If I have not been totally blind on this journey, I believe I have seen that Americans do not have this color on their otherwise so richly furnished palette.... Again, and again I have the feeling that suffering is regarded as something which is fundamentally inadmissible, distressing, embarrassing, and not to be endured. Naturally, we are called upon to combat and diminish suffering.*

*All medical and social action is motivated by the perfectly justified passion for this goal. But the idea that suffering is a burden which can or even should be fundamentally radically exterminated can only lead to disastrous illusions. One perhaps does not even have to be a Christian to know that suffering belongs to the very nature of this our world and will not pass away until this world passes away. And beyond this, we Christians know that in a hidden way it is connected with man's reaching for the forbidden fruit, but that God can transform even this burden of a fallen world into a blessing and fill it with meaning.*

Victor Frankl, noted psychiatrist, suggests that love is the only way to truly know another person. To elaborate, I would argue that love is the act of fully embracing the other. Entering their lives at a level we can only achieve by self-surrender, by allowing the other to be who they are, regardless of what that might be. The issue, however, is that the deeper we love someone, meaning the closer we get to that person, the more vulnerable we become.

And the more vulnerable we become, the greater the possibility of being hurt or suffering. Either because our beloved has done, or said something to wound us, or because our beloved is themselves suffering, and we feel hopeless to do anything about it.

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The reality is that the more we engage with others in deeper relationships, the greater the potential for suffering. I guess you could avoid all relationships to try and avoid suffering, but isolation and loneliness are a most grievous way to suffer.

Loneliness is such a scourge on humanity, that the British government recently named a minister of loneliness to combat the problem. Christ's call to us, is to accept our woundedness, our brokenness, which we all have, and redeem it with his power. And just how does this work. Well, just as Peter suggests. We begin by acknowledging that our wounds are a part of humanity. Every time we suffer, we are sharing in the universal human experience.

Just as Jesus suffered so he could know our every weakness, our suffering gives us a healthy perspective on the fragility and struggle that is a part of our lives. A spiritually healthy follower of Christ does not dismiss their pain, nor do they parade it as a badge of honour, like we are some sort of martyr. Instead, we embrace Isaiah's words when of the suffering servant, that is Jesus, he wrote, "By his wounds we are healed". (Is. 53:5)

The thorn in the flesh may remain, as Paul states, "But his grace is sufficient". Our wounds remind us that the "rain falls on the just and unjust alike". But here is the best part I believe. By faith in Christ, each storm we pass through, gives us ample opportunity to see the rainbow; the hope that we possess in Christ. Our wounds remind us that nothing shall separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

So, we can come to one who is suffering, who is wounded, and incarnate the hope of Christ. We are willing to enter another's pain. Ask anyone who is suffering, or maybe you have experienced this yourself, and they will tell you that what disturbs a suffering person more than anything else is the aloofness of family and friends. In fear of our own wounds, we might avoid the other. We might refuse a tender embrace, an attentive ear, or simply our presence. It's as if we are afraid the other's suffering is going to harm us.

As Christ laid down his life for us, we are called to lay down our lives for others, and that means entering other's suffering. If our laudable goal is to ease, or perhaps in some cases stop suffering, how can we do that from a distance. You all know by now, my enjoyment of sport fishing, but one of the greatest frustrations in fishing is not knowing the best places to find the fish; especially on a lake, or river you've never been on before.

I could spend several hours, or even days trying to figure it out, often with great frustration, or I can do what? Hire a local fishing guide. Someone who knows the body of water. Knows where the underwater structure is that fish like and knows the best lures or bait. Going with a guide increases the odds dramatically of finding the fish and catching them. How can we ever hope to help someone in their suffering, if we have never been there ourselves?

If someone is ill, lonely, depressed, anxious, grief stricken, or any manner of humanities wounds, doesn't it make sense to have someone who's been there, done that.

Someone to walk through the valley of shadow with them. We know this instinctively, and by experience.

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Why else would we have so many types of support groups where people going through specific struggles can find people who understand. People who have walked the same road. That is partly why Christ suffered and died. The righteous for the unrighteous, so that he could show us the way back to God.

Author and lecturer Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a 4-year-old child whose next-door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who recently had lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."

In 1 Peter 4:8-10 there is a phrase that sums up what should be our approach to each other. Peter writes, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." "Good stewards of God's manifold grace". What a wonderful phrase!

Are we good stewards? Do we incarnate the love and grace of Christ to others? Because only when we do, are we truly part of God's rainbow coalition.