

The Bow and the Dove

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York

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February 22, 2015

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

I.

A little more than a year ago, you and I were introduced to each other, and so began a journey that we are as yet just beginning. Today we start the season of Lent, a journey of renewal and remembering, of confession and intention. Some fast in this time, some renew their baptismal promises: ok, and some of us don't do much at all! But this year as we enter Lent, I want to ask you all to do something. Help me: in these forty days, reflect together on the journey of one little gathered body of people of faith, located each Sunday morning here on Nott Terrace in Schenectady.

What is this Journey all about? Consider with me the question of why we have communities we call churches: why bother? And just what is our calling here in this congregation?

For starters I want to be upfront with you not only this morning but each Sunday for the next several weeks about my convictions about why we *do church*—why we put so much energy into coming together as people of faith. In return, I ask you at your convenience to share with me personally YOUR sense of what it means to be in community as a people of faith on this peculiar journey. Perhaps the discussion we have after church each Sunday will be helpful! For Journey will be our theme: the journey inward and the journey outward.

II.

In our two readings from the bible this morning, we encounter two signs, two road signs, if you will, that are critically important to answering these questions—this “Why do we do church” question and the “What is our calling” question. The two signs, if you haven't already figured it out from our worship service, are a rainbow—and a dove.

Sign number one: in ancient times, the war-*bow* was a modern weapon of warfare. It was the latest, a fine symbol of high-tech battle-gear. It was a sign of the ability to wage war effectively and with great destructive power. You could stop horses and chariots with bows; you could strike from a distance, death from the sky.

In today's passage in the book of Genesis, we join Noah and his tribe after the flood is done. We find ourselves listening in to a God who is declaring a new covenant with humanity and all of creation. As the world is just drying out from a terrible flood, which has wiped out almost every living thing, God speaks out! “Going to lay down my sword and shield,” says God. “Gonna hang up my battle-bow, gonna study war no more.” This is God hanging up God's war bow, in the heavens, a sign that God has had a change of heart- or that God's people have had a

changed understanding of who God was all along! No longer is this a God who deals with those who get out of line with a flood. God is by implication done with dealing by smiting or obliterating. No longer will God deal with humankind --or with nature-- that way. When the storm-clouds start to gather, says God, look up in the sky. You'll see it hanging there—my word to you that I am not going to be in the destruction business any more. This is the sign of my covenant with every living creature—this is the sign that I intend to be the God of life and not the deity of death.

Now this story raises terrible problems, let's be honest. In the first place, for several thousand years we haven't gotten the message, either about who God is or the implications for you and me. Does the rainbow sign mean that there will be no more terrible natural disasters? Clearly not! If so, the sign is worthless. Destruction has not ceased. It is there in nature-- millions have died in floods, fires and earthquakes since this ancient story says that rainbow got hung up there that day. And war's destruction has increased, not ceased. **God's** bow may hang up there— but so many have died at the hands of the **human** bow, the musket, the rifle, the machine gun, the missile, the landmine, the gas-chamber, the handgun, the “smart-bomb” the drone, the knife. So if we thought that God was going to be able to stop all destruction that day- we were wrong. And if having faith rests on that presumption, that God can take care of it all for us, we can give it up as a failed experiment. Clearly that isn't what the rainbow means. However what the sign *does* mean is that we ought not to impute divine judgment—divine wrath—to nature. We cannot blame **our** disasters on God either. When bad things happen, we can't just be going around saying “Oh see, God is judging _____. Fill in the blank. “That isn't how I am working anymore,” said the God of the Old Testament writer, way back when.

If God has given up the battle-bow and gone for the rainbow, what are we to make of what we humans are up to? Playing little gods, humanity seems intent on destroying creation! We have covered the sea with bits of plastic bottle and filled the sky with carbon, threatened to destroy the creation itself, not with water, but with fire. And when it comes to our enemies, we take the battle bow approach very quickly; the “last resort” of war becomes the only resort, in minutes it seems.

This ancient story from the book of Genesis raises vital questions for people of faith. In a world where folks are still all too anxious to sing about God being on our side, where people are all too anxious to call down the wrath of God on enemies, where does the church stand? Are we willing to be signs of a different way, as faith communities? I hope so! In a world where religious leaders are all too wont to justify war in the name of holiness or righteousness, where do Christians stand?

It is my conviction that we are collectively called to be agents of reconciliation—because every time we see a rainbow in the sky, we are reminded that the God we profess is a God of reconciliation. God has hung up the battle gear, hoisted the bow where all flesh can see it! So, then, if we want to say that God is on our side, where do we stand? Every time people see the church, may they see a rainbow sign.

There's still more to being rainbow signs as people of faith. In this lovely old story in Genesis God has declared sacred not just human life but all life on the face of this planet. We

are all part of that bigger picture—we humans are not granted an isolated role, nor a dominating role, nor a destructive role. What does it mean to be human signs of reconciliation with ALL flesh—with all creation? God’s gift of the rainbow sign is a good start for greening our understanding of the gospel. There is a new covenant not only with humanity but with all of creation- a covenant of care. God has just signed a unilateral unconditional cease-fire. Just look up when the storm clouds gather. Just look up when they start to clear. Ad if God has declared peace with the earth itself, well, God’s people surely have a calling.

III.

It is one thing to be an institutional signpost, and another thing to be living signs; one thing to take positions and another thing to live them out publicly. It was the profound theologian and preacher Howard Thurman who said: “*Community cannot for long feed on itself; it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers [and sisters].*”

That brings us to our second biblical sign. The dove-like spirit that descends on Jesus in Mark’s Gospel is a mysterious sign—a momentary glimpse of the wind, a breath, a flame, a flicker of light. It too is a sign of God’s favor and love—and yet it is not only some meek sweet dove, because the same unpredictable spirit that shows up like a little bird drives Jesus from there into the wilderness to be tested, a dove turned into the overwhelming gale-force winds of grace.

What would have to happen for a congregation to be driven by this dove-like spirit of God’s love? What would it mean to be seized by the gentle flicker, the holy glimpse? What would it take to become so absorbed and filled with this Spirit—that you and I become the glimpse, become the breeze, become the occasion for overwhelming grace?

This is the second sign I ask you to reflect on today—the Dove-sign of an unpredictable Spirit. What does it mean for Emmanuel Friedens Church to live its life as a hard-to-catch sign of this same Spirit? I suspect it has started to happen already, many years ago.

The Spirit that overtook Jesus and drove him, first the wilderness and then a ministry of healing and confrontation with the powers and institutions of his day, that same Spirit, is alive now. I can testify to that from my own life—as you can from yours. And what are the tangible forms this sign takes? In the ministry of Jesus we find enemies reconciled, prisoners freed, the captives liberated, the mourners laughing, the dead raised, the occupying forces of people’s lives expelled. Symptoms of a spirit—glimpses of the dove.

Refugees welcomed, violence opposed, people of different genders, orientations, races and nations come together as one—glimpses of the Spirit? Truth spoken in love, hope insisted upon, sacrifices made, people ready to stand up and sometimes act up – even shy people, even fearful people! Glimpses of the Spirit? All are part of who we are and who God call us to be.

IV.

So why do we bother with church? What are we trying to build, and what is our calling? I am convinced we need to dare to BE God's rainbow signs, in these times. We need to stand for something publicly—and when it comes to it, what we are standing for as *covenant* community is the same forgiving reconciling rectifying love of which God hung up a sign there in the sky so long ago.

And yet it isn't enough to stand for something in the abstract, just the principle! It isn't enough to gather, to constitute, to adopt. We need also to allow ourselves to be seized by a Spirit, be part of a living movement—the movement of the same amazing healing, controversial, disturbing, embracing resurrecting Spirit that filled the one in whose name we gather. We need to let our lives be living signs on earth, to let our lives be carried on the dove wings of the spirit. And we need to let our congregation be moved and changed and fulfilled by that living loving unpredictable Spirit.

We have just begun our journey together, a year after getting acquainted and deciding to travel some miles together. What will it mean for this congregation to be a rainbow sign of reconciliation in this city and region, in these times? Part of it means building on the commitment we have already made a commitment to be open, to welcome and affirm all people, gay and straight black and white and Latino, in this place. Part of it is about saying we are going to live for the kind of promise and justice and peace that that rainbow sign stands for—willing to get out there and speak and act openly in the wider community. In a hawkish world, we must represent the dove; in a world ready to give up on love, we are invited to insist that there is a Spirit more powerful than hate, an economics more powerful than personal profit. Emmanuel Friedens church, we have a calling—to be a living sign of a God who has chosen a different way....