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Genesis 9:18-17
Hanging Up Your Weapons
M. Craig Barnes

The rainbow is one of our favorite symbols. According to scripture, it reminds us that after a time of great destruction, when God placed his bow in the clouds, he hung up his weapon. This means God is no longer interested in hunting you down.

We do not get beyond the sixth page of the Bible before we read that God has despaired of the human potential. "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind . . . And he said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them . . . Make yourself an ark.'" (Genesis 6:5-7,14)

Last week three more bombs exploded in Kabul; Israelis intensified air strikes and the advance of troops in Gaza; the North Koreans launched a missile designed for destruction; Ethiopian troops crossed the border into Somalia; five U.S. soldiers were charged with executing an Iraqi family; sixty-six Iraqis were blown apart in explosions; and three more Marines were killed there yesterday. "For the earth is filled with violence because of them . . ."

Closer to home last week, a man was handed over to trial for murdering his wife; four men were shot in the urban neighborhoods of our city—one by a teenager; and a young girl was abused by her own father. Clearly, the human condition has not improved that much since the sixth page of the Bible. We continue to do quite a bit of violence, and I doubt God is any more impressed with us than he was with Noah's generation.

Even if all of this horror seems pretty distant to you, the chances are great that last week you watched violence being done to another person's reputation, career, or dreams. The weapons that were used may not have been guns or swords. Perhaps the people around you prefer to use money, the law, or their social prestige as a weapon. Perhaps they simply prefer words. But words can do more damage than can ever be repaired. Words can cut out a person's heart with a single sentence.

As Noah went into his ark for refuge, maybe you have come to church seeking sanctuary from all of the violence in all of its forms. Maybe you're tired of being constantly defensive and would just as soon have God go ahead and rain down a flood of judgment on someone. But God tried that once. And it was so awful he decided he would never do it again.

In the ninth chapter of the Bible we are told, “Then God said to Noah, . . . I am establishing my covenant with you and with your descendants after you . . . that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, never again . . .” This means that the rainbow in the sky is not some sentimental assurance that things will get better. It’s an enduring symbol of a day that God hung up his bow and promised, “Never again will I be provoked to use my weapons against my creatures.”

Now let us be careful to remember what this covenant does not say. It does not say that there will not be great storms in life, or that the human condition will progress beyond the point of being violent. It says that the storms and the violence will not overwhelm you because God will never again be found in them. Nor does the covenant say that there will not be consequences to sin. Typically, sin brings its own consequences. But the covenant says that being destroyed by God will not be among them.

If the truth be told, the story of the flood and rainbow is hard to believe. For some it is hard to believe because the story sounds suspiciously like ancient mythology with its passion for explaining natural phenomena as the activities of the gods. But that isn’t the real problem we have with this narrative. No, the real reason we have our doubts is located in what the story teaches, namely that God has put his weapon of judgment aside.

We find it very hard to believe that God won’t just nail us if we sin. It is even fundamental to our understanding of justice. From childhood we have believed that if you do well, you will get rewarded, and if you do something you should not do, you will get punished. And the last thing you want is to get punished by God.

Often I find this is the underlying assumption behind the questions of those who are in trouble. When the floods have overwhelmed them, pulling them into a torrent that sweeps away the life they knew, many find themselves wondering what they did to deserve this. “Where did I go wrong?” they ask. “I must have done something. . . .” It breaks my heart to hear those questions. More to the point, it breaks the heart of God who made it clear long ago that he’s not interested in judgment. “Never again,” he said.

Notice that the covenant God makes with the earth is unconditional. He doesn’t say, “If only you do well, then I will keep the dark chaos from overwhelming you.” There are no “if . . . then” statements at all in this covenant. The promise simply springs out of the heart of God and is maintained only by his grace.

So, who it is that is served by the rainbow? Is it supposed to be an encouragement or a source of inspiration to us? Not really. Remember God said, “When the bow is in the clouds, **I** will see it, and **I will** remember the everlasting covenant.” This means that the rainbow has nothing to do with us. In fact, notice that the bow is pointing to heaven as if to symbolize the way that God makes himself accountable to his own covenant.

This is, in essence, a story about God and about his decision to give us grace. And it is hard to believe because it scandalizes those of us who have tried so hard with life. We don’t believe in

these old stories about grace because we don't want to. Instead, we want to believe that you do get what you deserve in life. That's because we don't think of ourselves as the prodigal sons and daughters. We haven't squandered our opportunities or run off chasing fantasies. We certainly aren't the ones shooting up the streets. No, we've been careful—like the older brother who stayed home and took care of business.

Certainly, none of us are the under the illusion that we are perfect, but we don't think we deserve to be destroyed by God's flood of judgment either. It is as though we conduct life between the twin agonies of a high standard on the one hand and a nagging self doubt on the other. As a people who still want a God of judgment, we need him to set the rules and gives us the high standards. But as a people who know how frail we are, we aren't sure we've done enough. All of which results in holding on to God like you hold on to an electric current—it hurts so much to worship a demanding God, but we just can't let go. We just can't stop believing you get what you deserve in life because we're sure we deserve something. Maybe not the best, but something. We've tried so hard, and been so careful, and have worked at getting life right.

Remember, though, the point of the parable of the prodigal is not to be the one who is right, but to make it into the arms of the father. And only the one who does that realizes he has nothing to stand upon. In fact, he is on his knees. All he can do is be grateful for the mercy he receives. No one makes it into the Father's arms by insisting on his or her rights.

Only when we understand the radical nature of the grace of God, and the way it overthrows our sense of defensiveness and self-justification, will we be freed from America's favorite pastime of figuring out whom to blame for our problems. Life has not worked out as we had hoped. And we can't just let that go. Someone has to be responsible for our disappointments. We have tried blaming our fathers and mothers, our employers and past lovers, other races and religions, the economy and the people in power. "Somebody has done me wrong," we claim. "Somebody has to pay!"

Well, God would agree with that. There has been injustice. When we look beyond our own little disappointments, we find a world that is being torn apart by injustice every week. Somebody is always doing somebody wrong. And somebody has to pay. But after the flood, God swore that he would never pick up his weapon again. Never again. That's because you and I cannot afford to pay for the hurts we have caused each other. So all that was left was for God to pay. And that is what the cross is all about.

Jesus paid for the sins of America, the Taliban, and al-Qaida. He paid for the sins of Israelis and Palestinians. He paid for the sins of those who hurt you last week, for your sins, and mine. If we really believed that, we would not need to extract hurt from others. Maybe we could even hang up our own weapons. Amen.