

“Rainbow Connection”

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Based upon Gen. 9:8-17; Rev. 4:1-11

[A few bars of “*Rainbow Connection*” played on the piano.] Do you remember that song, famously sung by Kermit the Frog in *The Muppet Movie*?¹ Unfortunately, we don’t have the copyright permission to show you the wonderful beginning of that movie, in which the camera zooms in from afar on Kermit playing the banjo and singing in a swamp: “Why are there so many songs about rainbows/ And what’s on the other side?” he sings. “Rainbows are visions, but only illusions/ And rainbows have nothing to hide/ So we’ve been told, and some choose to believe it./ I know they’re wrong, wait and see/ Someday we’ll find it, the rainbow connection/ The lovers, the dreamers, and me.”² If you remember the song fondly from your childhood as I do, or from your children’s childhoods, then you know it was called “*Rainbow Connection*.” It was the theme song for the movie, and became for many, the theme song for their lives.

I’ve been humming that song in my head for a while now, inspired by today’s text from *Genesis*, which is also about rainbows. The story of Noah and the flood and its aftermath is part of what scholars call the “prehistory” in *Genesis*, a collection of stories that were added long after Israel had recorded all of the stories about their own history beginning with the call of Abraham. The prehistory is more poetic and mythic than Israel’s history, and much more universal in its scope and theology. These stories connect the God of Israel to the God who created the whole universe, and address more global questions about the nature of God and humankind, and how and why things have come to be the way they are. The story of Noah’s ark is among the most famous and is perhaps the most paradoxical of these stories. On the one hand, it has the feel of a fairytale, and has inspired more children’s merchandise and nursery decorations than probably any other story in the Bible. Who can resist all the animals marching two by two? On the other hand, the story has the feel of a nightmare, as God punishes humanity for its corruption by drowning most of life on earth. If the story ended with the flood, we might wonder about whether we even want to worship a God who would do that. But thankfully, it doesn’t. It ends with the part we heard today, God making an eternal covenant never to flood the earth again; in other words, it ends with God offering mercy and eternal devotion to humankind, even after acknowledging that “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” This God, who loves us and is forever merciful to us despite our sins, is the God Israel would come to know as their liberator Yahweh, and we would know as our Savior Jesus Christ.

There are lots of things that are interesting about God’s promise of eternal mercy, which is called the Noahic (No-AY-ic) Covenant. The first thing is that it is a one-sided covenant. God offers it without requiring anything in return from us. The second thing is that it is eternal. There is no expiration date on this bit of good news. But the third, and most important thing for us to consider today, on Earth Day Sunday, is that the covenant is not simply between God and

¹ “*The Rainbow Connection*,” song by Andy Williams, in *The Muppet Movie* (Jim Henson, 1979); see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEnC5gwNAN0>

² *Ibid*; see also <https://genius.com/Kermit-the-frog-the-rainbow-connection-lyrics>

humankind. God makes the covenant with the whole earth. Thus, in the verses I just read, God says at least six different ways that there is no living thing anywhere on earth that will ever exist which will not be covered by this covenant. In addition to human beings, the covenant's beneficiaries include birds, domestic animals, wild animals— anything with flesh. Tarantulas, pigeon, kangaroos, snowy owls, elephants, snakes, and mice; you name it they are on the list. All of Creation will be covered by this promise, God says. Then God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the promise. Although God hardly needs prompts to remember things, God adds that every time God looks at a rainbow, God will remember God's promise and be merciful.

This story has made rainbows sacred for people of faith ever since. Instead of thinking about leprechauns and pots of gold, we see rainbows and think about how our relationship with God will forever be characterized by God's forgiving mercy and steadfast love and grace. This is such a blessing, particularly during rainy seasons which might otherwise depress us. But the rainbow was never meant to be a blessing for us exclusively. This blessing was meant for all living things; and I fear that we have forgotten that. We have lost the rainbow connection we had with them over time. Clinging to a misinterpretation of *Genesis* 1, we have taken away from the prehistory that we can have power over the earth and use it as we please. Clinging to a distorted understanding of *Genesis* 9:1-7, in which God extends to Noah and his descendants a new right they didn't have before the flood to eat animals as well as plants, we have reduced the living creatures of the earth to things that are valuable only if they meet our needs.

“What good is a bear?” a French rancher demanded in 2005 when conservationists first launched a campaign to repopulate the Pyrenees with the brown bears meant for that habitat. “If people want to see bears, they can go to a zoo or to a circus. But we don't need them here.”³ Although he lost his battle to keep the bears away then, that rancher was not alone in his sentiments that animals have no right to their own territories. In the last 15 years, there has been a constant struggle between those who want to graze their sheep on those mountains, and those who desperately want to save endangered bears. The same kind of struggle is now playing out in our country between those trying to protect wolves for all the good they do whole ecosystems, and those who want to herd their cattle wherever they please,⁴ and between those who want to protect the Alaskan wilderness and national parks from the threats of oil pipelines, and those who want to make life easier for corporations.⁵ This kind of battle is even playing out in our own neighborhood with the fights about a proposed plan to install a “Maglev” magnetic levitation train track between Baltimore and DC. One of the favored routes goes through the Patuxent Wildlife Refuge. “I can't find words strong enough to express what I feel,” said Marcia Watson, president of the Patuxent Bird Club. “It's an environmental disaster in the making.”⁶ But others

³ Sanguin, Bruce, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos* (Kelowna: CopperHouse, 2007) 71; Sachs, Susan, “*An ursine battle brews in Pyrenees*,” THE GLOBE AND MAIL, May 10, 2006; retrieved April 4, 2021 from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/an-ursine-battle-brews-in-pyrenees/article18162042>

⁴ “*Did We Only Bring Wolves Back So We Can Kill Them Again?*” Predator Defense, <https://www.predatordefense.org/wolves.htm>

⁵ “The Environmental Movement and the Oil Industry,” PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pipeline-environmental-movement-and-oil-industry/>

⁶ As quoted in Cox, Jeremy, “*High-speed train could go through ‘irreplaceable’ land in Maryland*,” BAY JOURNAL, March 2, 2021; retrieved April 4, 2021 from https://www.bayjournal.com/news/growth_conservation/high-speed-train-could-go-through-irreplaceable-land-in-maryland/article_73ce9f30-7856-11eb-a581-ab45e0fb1552.html

point to the fact that to put it anywhere else would be to displace people, and argue that the train will be fast, pollution free, and help commuters.

What good is a bear? What value is a fox or a frog or acres of trees and streams? The problem with all of these questions is that we ask them almost exclusively from our selfish perspective. What we mean is what good are they to us? What value are they to us? Can we eat them? Can we make them work for us as lab animals or laborers or entertainment, or are they are they pests that interfere with our plans? The Bible would have them think of them quite differently. According to the Bible, Creations' value and goodness is measured by God, not us. The animals and birds are good because God says they are good. They are valuable because God has demonstrated their value by covenanting with them.

We shouldn't need a rainbow to remind us of this connection any more than God does because the rest of the Bible is replete with other reminders. As C.S. Lewis observed, one of the striking features of the Scriptures is that they praise all kinds of animals that have little to do with us.⁷ *Psalm* 104 praises God for making trees where storks nest, and rocky crags where eagles roost and wild mountain goat climb; *Job* records God delighting when the wings of the ostrich flap joyfully, and then grilling Job about how little he understands other animals: "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn?" God asks. (*Job*. 39:1). "Look at the [hippopotamus,] which I made just as I made you; it eats grass like an ox... It is the first of the great acts of God— only its Maker can approach it with the sword.... Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord.... Will it make many supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you? Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever?" (*Job* 40:15, 19; 41:1, 3-4); When the prophet Isaiah gets to voice God's dream for the earth, it is of a peaceable kingdom where leopard and kid, cow and bear, infant and asp play together side by side, and no one is hurt or destroyed. (*Is*. 11:1-9). Similarly, when Jesus teaches his followers about what life is like in his kingdom, he uses Creation as his illustration, finding God's grace in all kinds of living things: mustard seeds, fig trees, vines and gardens, sheep, goats, lilies, ravens and more. Jesus didn't look down on Creation or talk about how one day it would all be replaced so we can use it as we please. He saw everything on earth as the handiwork of God and part of God's new creation.

If we go looking in the Bible not just for nature references but specifically for rainbows, we find in them continued connections with Creation. In *Ezekiel's* vision of God on a throne, and again in John's vision today in *Revelation* of the throne room of heaven, rainbows provide a dome-like ceiling over the throne, and over 4 living creatures which worship and serve God. (*Ez*. 14-28; *Rev*. 4:6-7). One looks like a lion, another looks like an ox, the third looks like an eagle, and the fourth like a human being. Notice how in these creatures we see the whole of the animal kingdom represented: wild animals, domesticated animals, birds, and human beings? Notice how all four beings are creatures, and all four creatures are equal in power and value? The Church later made the animals symbols of the Gospel writers, and symbolized Jesus with a fish, effectively incorporating the sea life that had been left out. All of these steps were critical to its

⁷ Hoezee, Scott, *Remember Creation: God's World of Wonder and Delight* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), 53.

understanding of the Gospel because around the time John of Patmos wrote *Revelation*, a heresy called Gnosticism was on the rise. Gnostics rejected the value of all things material and celebrated only the spiritual. John's images of animals at the foot of God under a sparkling green rainbow that shines like the northern lights, offers an emphatic "No!" to this kind of thinking. Even in the heavenly throne room, God's Creation and God's earthly creatures are celebrated.

How can we recover the rainbow connection God has given us with all of Creation? I read a joke online this week that may give us a clue. A minister was invited over to have a meal with one of the families in his church. When the family's toddler saw the pastor get out of his car, he said to his parents, "The creature is coming, the creature is coming."⁸ Creature/preacher—it's a funny misunderstanding, but also a true insight. Preachers are just creatures, so are teachers and lawyers, doctors and mechanics and all the rest of us. Human beings are just creatures among many, not gods. We are special to God, made in God's image, but for the purpose of caring for God's creation, not crushing it. We are not more important to God than the other living things God made. If we could just remember this, if we could just recognize when we do cost benefit analysis about our plans for the Earth that the interests of God's non-human creatures are not less important than our own, then maybe we would make decisions that were less selfish and more merciful.

The song *The Rainbow Connection* can help us with these next steps, by reminding us, like the biblical symbol, that the future rests in our hands. When God covenanted with the earth and put a rainbow in the sky to remind God forever to be merciful to the earth, *God* promised not to destroy Creation again by flood. But we didn't promise anything. It was a one-sided covenant; and human beings are more than capable of destroying things, as history has shown. We don't have to be instruments of destruction, however. We can turn the rainbow into a circle of life by matching God's promise not to destroy. When Paul Williams, who wrote *Rainbow Connection*, what the song was really about, he cited the second verse, "Who said that every wish would be heard and answered when wished on the morning star? Somebody thought of that and someone believed it and look what it's done so far," and said that the song is about recognizing that, "What we believe in we help to create."⁹ Right now the current rate of species loss varies between 100 and 10,000 times the background extinction rate. A 2019 report on Biodiversity and Ecosystems noted that up to one million plant and animal species are facing extinction due to human activities.¹⁰ To stop this we need to believe that it is possible to live in a world which benefits both humanity and Creation. We need to believe that the vision Isaiah had of the Peaceable Kingdom is not just worthy of painting, but also of pursuing with intention and passion. If we believe animals, plants, air, and water are ours to abuse, we will. If we believe that climate change is outside of our control, we won't try to stop it. We need to believe with every

⁸ *Animating Illustrations*, in "Wild Beasts" sermon, Homileticonline.com, Feb. 17, 1991; <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/2571>

⁹ Deusner, Stephen, "The Rainbow Connection" at 40: Paul Williams Reflects on Kermit the Frog's Banjo Classic," The Bluegrass Situation, July 23, 2019;

<https://thebluegrassituation.com/read/the-rainbow-connection-at-40-paul-williams-reflects-on-kermit-the-frogs-banjo-classic/>

¹⁰ *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (2019), available at <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>; see also "UN Report: Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating'" United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, May 6, 2019; <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>

fiber of our being in the world as God envisions it, so that we will be willing to do whatever it takes to help make that dream come true, even if that means sacrificing some of our human comforts for the good of our non-human covenant partners. If we do this, then someday we will indeed find it, the rainbow connection, the nature lovers, the dreamers, all of us.

Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote, “Love all Creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals. Love the plants. Love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things, and once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly, more and more every day. And you will at last come to love the whole world with an abiding universal love.”¹¹ We like to make the territorial battles between creatures and ourselves so complicated. But in many ways, they really do come down to love. Do we love anything as much as ourselves? With gratitude for the mercy God shows us despite our selfishness, let us strive to love as God loves the whole of Creation, so that no living things need fear destruction, and together we can live in peace. Amen.

¹¹ As quoted in Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos at 241.