

God's ULTIMATE HANG-UP
Sermon, February 18, 2018
The Second Sunday in Lent
Texts: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Some of you may remember our previous hymn (*"O Love That Will Not Let Me Go"*) was written by a blind man, George Matheson, a Scottish pastor; I like to point this out whenever we sing this hymn. In his journal George Matheson had written: *"My hymn was composed in the manse of Innellan on the evening of the 6th of June, 1882, when I was 40 years of age. I was alone in the manse at that time. It was the night of my sister's marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering."*

He went on to write that he wrote the lyrics in about five minutes; almost as if the words were dictated to him. He never actually confided what caused his "mental suffering," but those who knew him suspected the probable cause was his sister's wedding reminded him of a bitter disappointment he experienced just before he was to have married. His fiancée, when she learned of his failing eyes and impending blindness, informed him, *"I do not wish to be the wife of a blind preacher."* And she left.

Now, Matheson was an accomplished man; he had earned multiple educational degrees and enjoyed a successful pastorate, all of which was pretty spectacular for a blind man in the 19th century. His sister had been the one to care for him throughout the years, his constant companion and aide. He was now forty, his sister's marriage brought a fresh reminder of his own heartbreak, and now his sister was gone (*albeit in a happy way*) as well. That night he probably wondered if he would always be alone, if his life would ever amount to anything worth loving; he may have wondered if his life would always be so literally and figuratively dark. It was in that dark cloud, though, that he was given a renewed vision of a Love that will *not* let him go, no matter what. George Matheson chose to *"... trace the rainbow through the rain, and trust the promise is not vain that morn shall tearless be."* If anyone had cause to be discouraged, if anyone had reason to wonder "Where is God?" in the midst of their darkness, if anyone had difficulty seeing where they were going in life, it was this blind composer. But he knew by faith the only way to see a rainbow is to look through the rain. You need both the sun and the rain to make its colors appear.

It is a beautiful sign: the sign of the rainbow. According to our Old Testament reading, the first rainbow came after the Flood of Noah's time. You may remember the popular little book that came out years ago: All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Someone penned a take-off on that entitled, All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Noah's Ark. Each of these could probably be a sermon topic in itself, but I'll just quickly read off a few: 1. *Don't miss the boat.* 2. *Remember that we are all in the same boat.* 3. *Remember that the woodpeckers INSIDE are often a bigger threat than the storm outside.* 4. *Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.* 5. *Stay fit. When you're 600 years old someone may ask you to do something really big.* 6. *Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done.* 7. *Build your future on high ground.* 8. *For safety's sake travel in pairs.* 9. *Speed isn't everything. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.* 10. *When you're stressed, just float awhile.* 11. *Remember the Ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.* And finally, 12: *No matter the storm, when you are with God there's always a rainbow waiting.*

"Never again," says God, *"will I destroy all life through a flood."* The sign of this promise is a bow He hangs in the clouds; by the way, there's a slight mis-translation in our text, because the original Hebrew is simply the word "bow," not "rainbow." This act is a remarkable thing, culturally and theologically. Though the bow has been romanticized by myth and movie and co-opted by the politics of pluralism, this is in its original use a military action. The sign of God's fidelity to his promise ... a bow ... is a weapon of war. A battle bow. In the symbolism and imagery of that ancient middle eastern context, what God was doing was *hanging up His weapon*. Never again would He threaten the earth with the judgment of destruction. As to the sermon title, all of us know a "hang-up" is colloquially defined as an emotional problem or inhibition, well, if being reluctant or reticent to condemn and destroy is a hang-up, then in a way, this is God's ultimate hang-up. He hangs up His battle bow, and it is significant to note which way this bow is now pointing. God hangs it in such a way that it points away from the earth. Which direction is it now pointing? It is now pointing toward heaven, not toward the earth. Now, hold that thought for a moment.

When we've looked at this in years past, I mentioned that if you are in an airplane, and somewhere over the rainbow (like Dorothy), you will see not a bow, but a complete circle. That is the heavenly perspective; the "bow" is actually a ring, a circle. This may be stretching the analogy a bit, but in this sense, the rainbow might be compared to an *engagement* ring. It is God's engagement ring, His pledge of love and redemption, the sign of His covenant of redemption and love ... for better for worse, he is pledging His love. And as we read in the New Covenant (or Testament), "*For God so loved the world, that He sent his Son ...*" He sent the One the New Testament calls the Bridegroom. I know I'm slightly mixing metaphors, but this rainbow covenant of God's faithful engagement with His people is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And note ... in hanging up His bow and pointing it toward heaven, God is preparing to take the arrows of judgment upon Himself. Thus, this covenant with Noah is a gracious covenant which finds its fulfillment in the new covenant, in Jesus Christ ... in whose broken body and shed blood God has aimed His weapon of judgment. In short, Jesus has taken the arrows, the arrows of judgment we deserve, thus preparing for Himself a redeemed and beloved Bride.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we usually read one of the three Gospel accounts of Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness, that forty day period of fasting and prayer which took place at the onset of His public ministry, just after His baptism. Whereas Matthew's gospel devotes eleven verses to this momentous account and Luke gives thirteen, tight-lipped Mark devotes just two. Mark 1:12-13 "*At once the Spirit drove Him out into the desert. And He was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him.*" So it was moments after His baptism, we are told, that the Spirit compels Jesus with divine force into the bleak desert. Biblically, it seems God has something of a divine habit of doing that; there are many such desert journeys and trials in the Scriptures. The desert is where God gets His people's attention. The desert is God's workshop. And the desert, the barren and dangerous place, is where our true character is often revealed.

The desert does not have to be the barrens of the Jordan valley. The desert can be wherever we are stripped of our support, our comforts, our security, the things we look to for safety and protection. The desert can be a hospital room. The desert can be the cold, silent, harsh wasteland of a growing breach with one's spouse or one's children. The desert can be the empty, heart sinking, immobilizing fear that financial insecurity can bring, or a grim diagnosis, or a loss of employment can bring. For George Matheson, the lonely desert was the loss of love, the loss of companionship, the loss of vision. But part of the *rainbow through the rain* promise is that the desert is often God's workshop, and it can be used for tremendous good. It can help us deal with things and attitudes and habits that would seduce us; it can help us identify and do battle with the downright demonic things threatening to wreak havoc in our lives. Yes, deserts are the place of testing; they are also the place of refining, strengthening, purifying.

But note it is not God who does the tempting of Jesus, He "*leads us not into temptation.*" Don't forget there really is an Adversary who would love to spoil the people and the things God holds dear. And in those desert places, when we are stripped of our normal means of support and well being, we meet this Adversary like we meet him nowhere else. When things are hard, and we are growing desperate, that's when we are most tempted to do whatever it takes to satisfy desires, meet our needs, attain our goals.

Mark gives no details of the nature of Jesus' temptations; that information may be found in Matthew and Luke's accounts, but Mark does include a unique detail the others don't. His is the only gospel that mentions the wild animals. Now, this is conjecture, but that *might* be because Mark's primary audience for his gospel was the church in Rome, where the wild animals of the arena were a very real threat to the Christians there. Perhaps Mark is telling those in Rome that just as their Lord was driven into a dangerous place with wild beasts, and there God's angels ministered to Him, so God's angels would minister to them when they are driven into the wild arena. And maybe the Spirit is telling all Christians that no matter the nature of the beast we may encounter in our desert arenas out there, we need not fear. Like Jesus, we, too, are given God's Spirit in baptism; we, too, are armed with the same power which Jesus exercised. And God's angels stand by to minister to us as well.

As we enter this Lenten season, whatever the boundaries of your particular desert, whoever or whatever the beasts are you may be encountering, know you are God's beloved son or daughter, and trust God to use this experience for the greater good while you face down the powers of the Adversary in your own life. Like George Matheson, choose to "*... trace the rainbow through the rain, and trust the promise is not vain that morn shall tearless be.*" You are not in the desert alone.