

THE ARC OF A MORAL UNIVERSE



Thirty two years ago my two roommates and I were driving home to the Midwest and college after spending a summer in California. I find driving across the country more of a task than an opportunity. Even in my youth a cross-continental journey was not a road trip that I celebrated.

As we travelled across the Wyoming plains, the skies ahead were inky, puffy, billowing, to be avoided. If you're looking for an unadventurous trip, rain clouds are not a welcome companion. As if taunting us, the dark clouds remained a few steps ahead of us, no matter how fast we sped.

Mid-way through one infinite, flat, empty Wyoming plain we ended our cloud chase. In the near distance rose a double rainbow; two rainbows slightly overlapping each other. They were vibrant, complete arcs with each end anchored in the ground. We stopped and took photos.

Thirty-two years have now passed and that still is the only time I have seen two entirely unbroken rainbows. I can likely count on both hands the times I've seen even one unblemished rainbow.

Well over 40 years have passed since I heard today's first reading of God's covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth with a flood, a promise marked by a bow set in the clouds. Somewhere along my road trip through life the words, "When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings" finally settled upon me leaving an impression that I have never forgotten. I cannot see a rainbow or catch a glimpse of even a partial arc playing hide and seek in the clouds without pausing to remember that this is a sign of God's covenant.

I cannot read of damage caused by extremely heavy rains, flooding, and tsunamis without recalling God's promise. I drove down to Corvallis last week and saw the swollen rivers and creeks, some spilling over onto the roads. These were the relatively unscathed areas of Corvallis. I admit the difficulty in remembering God's covenant while watching the local news but still these words come to mind.

As creatures of habit and routine we are saved from consciously remembering to brush our teeth, greet a friend, or kiss our spouses good morning and good night. But I can be forgetful. I rely on the missalette to correctly recite the revised Mystery of Faith. I lean on the crutch of a to-do list to remember to send a birthday card. If my wife doesn't write down the specific butter she wants—salted or unsalted—I am likely to return from the supermarket with the wrong kind.

Though the arc of colors filling the sky never fails to remind me of God's covenant to Noah, I pray that I never forget, and keep, God's new covenant, which is written on our hearts. As we hear in today's Responsorial Psalm, "your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant." What are God's ways?

The Lord's ways were more than adhering to the Ten Commandments; Christ preached and practiced compassion and justice. His covenant included more than red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet—the colors of the rainbow. His covenant included the colors of all humanity.

When I see a rainbow fill the sky I recall God's covenant with Noah. It does not take a double rainbow for me to recall Christ's covenant with me to be compassionate and just to all of humanity.

When I see a rainbow I will also recall a quote from Reverend Martin Luther King that I first heard last week, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. It bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice." Justice for all colors is God's way for us.

(Readings for First Sunday of Lent)



ARCHDIOCESE
OF PORTLAND
IN OREGON

Office of Life, Justice, and Peace