

**Sermon for The First Sunday of Lent
RCL Lectionary, Year B
March 1st, 2009**

**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

Some Rainbow Theology

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The Mill Valley elementary school system is truly a wonder, at least for this Kindergarten Dad. Early every school morning, eager parents fill up volunteer slots to help – from Kiddo to the classroom – so fast it makes my head swim. So it took me more than a semester to find an empty blank on the schedule to help in Kindergarten for only an hour or so. Daniel was delighted this Thursday when I stuck around for class for the first time, and I quickly learned why parents clamber over one another to volunteer.

After this week, I can't fully express the urge to spend the rest of my life in Kindergarten - the eyes wide open with wonder, the basics of life laid bare without the weight of experience or the worries of so-called "adult" responsibilities. In a world filled with news of drought and the drumbeat of woes over GDP, indices, and foreclosures, Kindergarten last week really was a garden of joy, an oasis of abundant life in the desert, an ark shuttered against the great flood.

Remember that poster, "All I ever need to know I learned in Kindergarten"? For me, that is so much more than just a cute reflection or a nostalgic nod over the shoulder. It's practically philosophical, almost, I daresay, theological.

Yes, Thursday for me brought with it a joyous morning of sitting in a small chair around a table with a group of Kindergarteners, all coloring pictures and writing out the letters that spelled out basic weather conditions. They were all like a bunch of eager little meteorologists-in-training pointing with excitement: sunny, windy, cloudy, rainy... The greatest question was how to draw "windy," because wind is felt more than seen, like the Spirit capriciously moving through life, sometimes fierce, sometimes gentle, sometimes blowing hot, sometimes cold.

Most of the children followed their teacher's example by drawing a tree in motion – when I reflect on it, I am reminded of the verse from John, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes,"* but we see and feel its results, like a life changed in the Jordan and being driven - blown even by the Spirit - into the wilderness to find meaning, purpose, and confront the deep powers of being.

But it was the last panel of the little green meteorological books that spoke volumes to me about our readings today. Not rainy or stormy, not even a description of weather, but simply "rainbow." And drawing and coloring the bow occupied most of the children's time. And it was rainbows that sparked a lively discussion among the children about magic and mystery. For rainbows aren't conditions like cloudy or sunny. They just are.

* John 3:8, NRSV.

One boy shared with the class how he made a rainbow with a water hose on a hot summer day. Daniel chimed in by describing the wonders of a prism he recently procured from the Discovery museum. He had proudly brought to class to show everyone.

Indeed, rainbows just are...after the storm, arcing in the sky, unassailable structures of light that we can only chase but never hold, see but never touch. Should we wonder why they captivated the imagination of our spiritual ancestors – became the subject, if only for a moment, of a great prehistoric, cosmological story about floods, arks, evil, faith, and God?

It was only four centuries ago - a drop in the bucket of human history - that Galileo argued that the same geometric laws on earth also governed the heavens. His was among the first of several radical departures from a long-held perception of a multi-tiered universe, and it departed from our ancestors' worldviews with more than a bit, if you'll forgive the pun, of gravity. Today, we explain rainbows not so much by the miraculous intervention of the divine, but by the laws of refraction, the nature of sunlight, and the study -- however dramatic still it might be -- of the weather.

But if the scriptural passages like today's story from Genesis are what scholars now call "etiology" - the storied explanations for natural phenomenon... if they seem to our post-enlightenment ears as rather quaint...children's stories, even...we might miss the deeper truths of Kindergarteners in the twenty-first century assiduously studying and ordering the colors of rainbows... and a God – our God – who has mathematically and geometrically woven covenant into the fabric of the cosmos.

For that is what Genesis is truly about today, even if the authors who put it into the form we have received understood the universe very differently from the way we do now. They pulled the Noah myth from stories old even in their time – Babylonian legends and, some speculate, fading cultural memories of a great flood in the Mediterranean world buried in the prehistoric past... And they tied them into the light of a new narrative that said God's presence and providential favor for humanity is written into the woof and warp of the natural world. And that favor is immutable, as unassailable and mysterious as the rainbow. It may seem ephemeral, but it often appears after the greatest storm, to remind us that we are not left wallowing in our own failings anymore, or accursed by the demons and demi-gods of old.

If Lent means spring, then the rainbow can be a Lenten image even in this season of droughts both natural and economic - the colors gleaned from God's grace bent earthwards by a love that is all powerful.

This Lent, as we follow Christ into the uncertainty, hunger, and raw visions of the wilderness, we are promised by the rainbow that God will meet us there. Humanity can no longer slip from divine grasp or life-giving love. Evil's dominion is already breaking, and Christ is here among us to finish the salvation already breaking into the human family. The storm is already passing, the drought is already fading, the darkness might be deepening but the dawn is already preparing to break. And we go into the wilderness chasing after the rainbow: seeking transformed lives, new vision, and purpose as the children of God.