

Sermon for February 18, 2018 (Lent1B) “The Trouble With Rainbows”
(Based on Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15)

On page 17 of the Archie McPhee catalog, you'll see them—a whole range of items featuring unicorns and rainbows. The company tagline is “purveyors of popular culture.” Each year they pick a few themes and run with them. Have you seen the wind-up fire-breathing nun or the Crazy Cat Lady action figure? You know their work.

One of this year's themes is “unicorns and rainbows.” There's the lunchbox, the coloring book, the box of rainbow bandaids to distract you from your wounds... there's even an “emergency unicorn” keychain with pre-recorded phrases like, “the world is made of glitter and rainbows.”

The rainbow has become shorthand for “failure to engage with reality.” It represents denial, a retreat into la-la-land. Christian kitch has a share in this. I don't think we get a single church-supply catalog that doesn't have cute little rainbow-decked Noah's Arks full of smiley, sanitized animals lurking in its pages.

But real rainbows aren't about fantasy or perfection. They are a product of refraction and dispersal, according to the science of optics. In other words, rainbows only emerge when light is broken. They require the wildness of a storm, or the shattering force of wave and waterfall. Or they require the sharp edges of cut glass. Rainbows become visible only when the gentle warmth of the sun has been shattered and splintered and hurled in different directions, shoved and splattered across the walls.

Gilbert Baker understood this. He grew up in Kansas, served as an Army medic in Vietnam, and was later stationed in San Francisco. He was honorably discharged in 1972, and became a political activist. Mary Dunn, a fellow activist, taught him to sew and he began making banners for various causes. He also met a man named Harvey Milk. At the time, the pink triangle was the only widely-recognized symbol for homosexuality. It had been used to identify gay men in Nazi Germany, so they could be rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Activists were trying to reclaim it as a

symbol of pride, but it was also a constant reminder of pain and discrimination and death, horror and trauma.

In 1976, Gilbert Baker watched as the entire nation bedecked itself with the Stars & Stripes for the U.S. bicentennial. He saw how that flag moved people, and filled citizens of every background with pride. Harvey Milk challenged him to create a flag that would be a new symbol of pride for the Gay community—a community formed by people who were targets of rejection, harassment, and so much shame.

Inspired perhaps by students in the peace movement, with their five-color “flag of the human race,” Baker decided his flag would be a rainbow. He probably didn't know it, but he drew on an amazing history. Back in the sixteenth century, reformer Thomas Muntzer used a rainbow flag to unite the hard-working peasants of Germany in a movement for democracy and freedom. Later, during the American Revolution, Thomas Paine proposed a rainbow flag to identify neutral ships at sea. In 1920, a rainbow flag was used throughout Europe to symbolize the International Cooperative movement.

It must have taken a huge leap of faith—that, and over thirty volunteers, sewing like mad—to create Baker's flag. That rainbow, that sign of love and promise, was created by people who were told God couldn't possibly love them, and the One who created the Universe would promise them nothing.

A rainbow only emerges when light is broken. And Creation itself is showing signs of brokenness. God promised Noah and his family that never again would a flood be a sign of divine punishment. But what do we do now, when the collective impact of our human activity causes the ice to melt and the seas have begun to rise? What do we do with the climate-change refugees, forced to abandon entire towns, entire cities, entire island nations—not because of God's judgement—because of our collective hunger for fossil fuels has disrupted the planet beyond what nature can heal?

A rainbow only emerges when light is broken. What about broken people, broken by the violence that scrapes at our windows and rattles in our ears? What about that

young man, like so many other young men, adrift in rising waters, flooded with a sense that he is unwanted, unloved, unremembered, unmissed... a young man who was targeted by white nationalists and trained into hate before he took aim at the students and teachers of his old high school. What of the broken men in Congress, so driven by professional self-preservation that they cannot see the blood, cannot hear the cries, cannot comprehend the pain of a nation devastated by mass shootings and murders, accidental shootings and suicides?

A rainbow only emerges when light is broken. It is a sign of promise, the splash of sealing wax on a legal contract older than time itself. The rainbow seals God's covenant not only with all humanity, but with all Creation, every living thing. Did you know that, when you see a rainbow, there are actually millions of other rainbows happening around it, even though you can only see one from where you're standing? A bird flying over you might see a different rainbow. A bee buzzing by might see a rainbow too, but in a different visible spectrum. Science has shown that plants respond differently to different frequencies of light—so perhaps the trees and the grass know something of rainbows, too.

The sign of God's promise is not limited. It is not exclusive. Jesus found himself in a desert, grieving the terrible losses he'd already known, wrestling with who he was meant to be, yet he was never alone. Mark's Gospel tells us: the wild beasts were with him. God meant for these creatures to comfort each other, to attend to each other. It's part of the Covenant.

I wonder what would happen if you and I sought out the wild beasts. What if we sought out the cringing politicians, the isolated and angry youth? What if we shared that wilderness with them, holding the space for them, keeping them company as they struggle to name their fear, their anger, their despair? And what if we, in turn, asked them to accompany us in our own wild grief?

A rainbow emerges when light is broken. & that light, broken open, is beautiful: a broken gift for a broken earth, poured out on every living being, to touch the sharp edges of our brokenness and shine fiercely on our wounds. You may be falling apart, but God declares: you are a part of something. These are your true colors. Let them shine.

*--Preached by Rev. Holly Morrison, pastor
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Sources used:

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160615-the-history-of-the-rainbow-flag>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/us/obituary-gilbert-baker-rainbow-flag.html>