

**WESTMINSTER**  
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SERMON

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# A Promise and a Plea

Dr. Jo Forrest



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In the beginning God calms the chaos of the earth, sends fish to swim in the sea, throws birds into flight, buries slithering things in the ground, and calls the people God created like you and me “very good.”

The goodness that initiates God’s creation should place all beings into harmony.

When it becomes obvious to God, we cannot or will not get along, the people that is, God steps in with covenant after covenant. God crafts these covenants to repair the breaches within humanity and mediate future relationships. Each covenant reveals distinctive facets of God’s character, and inspire our lives.

This Lenten season as we examine our hearts and relationships with one another and God, this sermon series will return to these ancient and enduring covenants.

In storytelling firsts always matter, and God’s first covenant is no exception.

The Book of Genesis states: God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil—evil, evil, evil from morning to night. God was sorry God made the human race in the first place; it broke God’s heart.

God thinks, “I’ll get rid of my ruined creation, make a clean sweep: people, animals, snakes and bugs, birds—the works.”

But Noah is different. God sees him as a righteous man.

God instructs Noah, “The violence is everywhere; I’m making a clean sweep. Build yourself a ship. Make rooms in it. You are also to take two of each living creature, a male and a female, on board the ship, to preserve their lives with you: two of every species of bird, mammal, and reptile—two of everything so as to preserve their lives along with yours.”

Rain falls for an inhumane length of time. The world floods.

When the waters begin to recede and Noah’s family looks at the wasteland, God instructs Noah, again: “Leave the ship, you and your wife and your sons and your sons’ wives. And take all the animals with you, the whole menagerie of birds and mammals and crawling creatures, all that swarming extravagance of life, so they can reproduce and flourish on the Earth.”

Before I read God’s first covenant, please pray with me,

*Dear God,*

*These ancient stories defy our sense of reasonableness –  
your furry, genocidal floods and arks, creepy crawly things,  
and a world destroyed.*

*Send your spirit among us that  
your promises defy our desire for evil doing  
and we turn to walk in the ways of your son. Amen.*

### Genesis 9:8-17

<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

<sup>9</sup> “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

<sup>12</sup> God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup> I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. <sup>16</sup> When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

<sup>17</sup> God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

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In Chicago, we lived a block from Oz Park, which is dedicated to Frank Baum, who wrote *The Wizard of Oz*. Before it became a movie classic by Metro-Goldwin-Mayer, one of the first color movies, it began as a children's book.

Life-like statues dot the park's perimeter of Dorothy and Toto, the Cowardly Lion, Tin Man, and Scarecrow. Scarecrow stands guard over the fenced flower garden, named "Emerald City."

Each summer the park fills at dusk with little girls wearing blue gingham dresses followed by parents pulling wagons with blankets to spread before the makeshift screen. Under starry nights, all ages watch and sing along, starting with "somewhere over the rainbow."

The story tells of a Kansas farmhouse uprooted by a tornado that crashes in a place on the other side of the rainbow, landing squarely upon the wicked witch of the east, freeing the munchkins, and setting Judy Garland off on a yellow brick road to find her way home.

It ends with the universal truth; there is no place like home.

Frank Baum was also known for non-fiction essays criticizing early 20<sup>th</sup> century political, economic, and social ills.

With that as background and knowing Baum wrote this story shortly after the US left the gold standard (no longer marking



our currency to the gold stored at Ft. Knox). Oz unfold as more than just a child's story. The name Oz looks much like the abbreviation of an ounce, the measure for precious metals such as gold bullion and silver.

Braum originally placed silver slippers on Dorothy to walk along the yellow brick, or gold paved streets. Costume designers replaced the silver with ruby for that techni-color contrast.

When the house lands on the witch, the Munchkins are freed, much like the little people needing to be freed from wicked bankers. The brainless Scarecrow represents the midwestern farmers treated as too ignorant for advanced economics.

Even though the Tin Man rusted solid standing in the rain after the shutdown of factory work, he lacks a heart from dehumanizing work. Now seen as allegorical, the Wizard stands in as a windbag politician who will say anything to appease the people and prey upon their fears.

Is *The Wizard of Oz* just a charming story?

It charms us and carries timeless truths as does the fable we stencil on nursery walls with animals two-by-two saved in Noah's Ark.

In the Ancient Near Eastern world, turbulent water was the symbol of ultimate, even mythological chaos.

Historians find over 200 ancient cultures and religions with *great flood* stories in their narrative treasuries. A high percentage of those stories explain a catastrophic flood results from divine authority and feature a favored human family who helps preserve creation from the deluge.

What's distinctive about our story in Genesis, then, isn't the basics but rather its tone, and overall lesson for people of all ages and in every age.

Scholars believe it was written during the time of Israelite exile by various tribes who found shelter far from home and attempt to make meaning of how and why their lives were destroyed.

Greed caused their society to collapse.

They ignored God's commands.

The common people became more marginalized.

All this allowed hostile nations to literally throw them out of their homes.

So these writers author a story of God outraged by the heart-breaking, violence on earth.

A vast and terrorizing flood was viewed as a return to the primordial chaos out of which God created the world in the first place. They'd like a do-over.

The dimensions of the ark, described in such detail, creating in the minds of the early Israelites a ship as fantastic as the Star Ship Enterprise of Star Trek.

The crisis is not so much the water, which threatens all life, regardless of guilt or innocence. The crisis comes from the way humanity's disregard for one another grieves God's heart. And sure enough, when the flood ends, God speaks not with regret, but with grief. Looking at creation destroyed – devoid of all life – moves God to embrace humanity in a new way.

God creates a universal covenantal promise – to humanity and also to “every living creature” – to disavow such violence once and for all. God's covenant to never take up a weapon against humanity becomes visible to us each and every time we see the rainbow. It's upended bow, like an archer's bow that is no longer capable of flinging God's lightning bolt arrows.

Rainbows don't reveal themselves on pure, clear-weather days. They require just the right combination of sunlight and rain droplets for the proper refraction to occur. It's a meteorological as well as a spiritual delight that still captures our attention.

Although unilateral, not demanding anything from us, the sign of the bow also represents God's plea for us to refrain from our evil and set down our weapons against the rest of creation.

By binding God's self to the fate of humanity, God becomes inherently invested in the fate of humanity and in a way keenly vulnerable, even exposed. Unlike the myriad flood fables of the time, God cannot sit back, such as the Greek or

Roman gods might. Those gods still threaten violence, ours promises grace to begin again.

Our authors take a common ancient genre and turn it into a testament to God's nonviolent heart.<sup>1</sup>

Centuries later the fable still holds a mirror to us: are we capable of recognizing the evil in our midst that destroys life and choose to stop?

My app from the *Wall Street Journal* pings me whenever they publish a story by their sports commentator and humorist, Jason Gay. On Thursday of this past week, his writing jumped from discipline to another, and will likely risk condemnation since he does not shroud the message.

Can't (try to) be funny today, sorry.

For a sports writer, the safest move is to sit out these moments—to categorize Wednesday's deadly gun violence in Kansas City as the serious business of serious people, and let this horrible incident wash over like so many incidents before.

That's the safe play. It's not the right one.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation Series*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 73-88, and Matthew Myers Boulton, *The Salt Project* podcast, "Understanding Easter - Part One: The Beginning," February 13, 2024, <https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2024/2/13/understanding-easter-part-one-the-beginning>.

This is our shared, societal sickness... Uncomfortable suggestions and emotions get chastised as “lectures.” We’re a country in which everyone has a right to blather on about a pop star in a skybox, but we shut down rather than openly discuss our epidemic of violence in public spaces.

This tragedy of gun violence belongs to all of us—every tragic incident, small, large, high-profile and unseen...

It should feel like a human emergency.

Only the hardest possible heart can look at the chaos at the Chiefs parade and not ache for the lives and families involved. We have a collective responsibility to dig into the roots of this repeated madness and urge our representatives to make a good-faith effort to address it.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of God’s rainbow, the church can be the place where conflict is taken seriously and respectfully, and not swept under the rug of silence. Before we give loyalty to any party or ideology or pursuit, we understand that we are all children of God. When we humbly bow before God, accepting we are not gods, and find our common humanity bound in God’s mercy, we grasp the plea God makes in rainbow.

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Gay “A Shooting Horror at the Super Bowl Parade,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/sports/football/shooting-kansas-city-chiefs-parade-super-bowl-0dda78a5>

The season of Lent calls us to examine the content and destiny of our lives, to acknowledge our sin, individually and as a community, and seek to make the changes we all can make.

When we get to Holy Week, we will tell welcome the victor in a celebratory parade. As the week unfolds, we will live the story once again of our human propensity to prop up the structures that enable evil. The gathered crowd will give way to only a few faithful who stand at the foot of his cross. Our Christian story brings us face-to-face with God's willingness to enter into human flesh as one of us and to lay down his life to prove love wins.





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