

Genesis 9:8-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and 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.^[a] ¹¹I 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.” ¹²God 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:¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶When 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.” ¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;^[a] with you I am well pleased."

The Temptation of Jesus

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news^[b] of God,^[c] ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;^[d] repent, and believe in the good news."^[e]

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Mark 1:9-15; Genesis 9:8-17

“Signs of God’s Promise”

Kerra Becker English

God never promised us happiness.

God never promised us success.

God never promised us security.

God never promised us prosperity.

God never even promised us that life would be fair.

And yet there are preachers who will preach that those things are exactly what God promises. And of course there are believers who want to believe that God has promised them happiness, success, security, wealth, and a life where the outcomes are always weighted toward fairness on the scales of justice. Therefore, when one or more of those things go missing, the tendency is to think that something must have gone awry in their relationship with God, or even more likely, they decide that those “other” people who haven’t made it just don’t know God very well. Even your friends, or at least Job’s friends in scripture, might tell you that if you’re good enough, faithful enough, and work hard enough – God will assure you of a very good life...Except for when that isn’t happening.

Then we often don’t know what to say. We pull up the standard clichés that we think will offer comfort. Just wait for the “silver lining.” God won’t give you more than you can handle.

There must be a reason for your illness, or your job loss, or your offspring's negative attitude. Chin up. Hang in there. It's all gonna be alright!

I've known about the flimsiness of that kind of theological approach to care from a very young age. I was probably about Ryleigh's age when the whispers about the pastor in my home church began. In front of the congregation, he was boisterous, always happy, quite charismatic, and that brought some liveliness into my otherwise kind of boring small town church. But during that same time my friend's mother was dying of cancer – and he didn't go to see her. He found excuse after excuse to avoid going to the hospital or to steer clear of talking at any depth with her husband. It upset a lot of people, a LOT of people who had experienced the harder side of life and already knew that God cannot be made to wave a magic wand and make it all better when life gets to be rough going. That's not how it works. The people were, rightfully so, grieved by his pastoral record. You just can't fool a congregation of people who've been deeply embedded in this tradition for multiple generations. You cannot tell them to smile all their troubles away. They know better.

From my six or seven year old perspective on that situation, I certainly couldn't give you the play by play for how all those discussions played out. But now that I've been a pastor for almost two decades, I can make some guesses. In the heat of those tense moments, I'm sure that unpleasant words were said, that defensiveness set in, and that my friend and her father would have much preferred not to have that drama added to the harshness of their situation at the time. What a big mess! Church communities can become such big messes so quickly because their medium is the real stuff of people's lives. We really do want to be happy, successful, secure, and reasonably sure that life is fair. We want to think that God's in on that plan with us. We try to

reassure one another that the shiny happy picture is the real one, and more often than not, it's just the façade we put over the real when the real gets to be too much.

And yet, all these stories about Jesus are alarmingly real. As soon as the voice comes down from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased," the Spirit pushes him out into the wilderness, where, as they say, it gets real. For forty days he is tempted by Satan. In biblical lingo, forty days may mean forty days, or it can be a metaphor simply meaning a **long time**. Mark doesn't give us the specifics of what happens out there like others of the gospels do. Maybe we don't really need to dwell on them, as we so often do, to see just how good we might come out given the same test. Instead, we are left to our own imaginations. We only know that the wild animals left him alone, and he was tended by angels, by good spirits that bolstered his strength to carry on. No promise of protection, or good will, or anything. God says to Jesus, "You are my son. I love you. Now GO."

I'd like to think my parenting style is a bit different from that. I want my children to feel protected from all those wilderness moments, but the truth is, my job is not to protect them, it is to prepare them as best as I can. One way of doing that is being real. I can't promise the quick fix, or the solution to all things. I can't even promise them that they will always feel like God is on their side. Even young children can see through our desire to shield them from all things painful. Maybe it was a good thing that my awareness of the church's fallibility came at such a young age. Rather than getting disillusioned, I was lucky enough to be surrounded by people who cared deeply for one another, and who understood that love can be painful, and creating community is hard. God doesn't always fix it, and sometimes God's people can mess up royally.

So if God's promise isn't about living the good life or the American dream, what is it about? From what I read in scripture the promise is all about God's love for us. The rainbow is put into the sky not to protect us from the rain, but to remind us that God loves us through the rain. God's love may take us to places where we don't want to go – like driving us out into the wilderness – but it won't leave us alone – maybe even if we want it to.

My spiritual director recently gave me poetic and prophetic work written in 1923 in Lebanon by Kahlil Gibran. Gibran was a poet, philosopher, and artist. His book, "The Prophet" reads like other ancient texts of wisdom – because it offers insights into life that is really real. I stumbled across it because of what it has to say about children, but today, I want to share with you what it says about love. Love is not a happy, feel good, Hallmark kind of emotion. It's more deep and rugged than that – which is the picture this book offers. Now remember that this book was written in 1923 and translated shortly after – so though it has a masculine ring to it, that's more about the limits of language than the limits of our imaginations, so listen as the prophet is asked, "Speak to us of Love."

When love beckons to you, follow him, though his ways are hard and steep.

And when his wings enfold you, yield to him, though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.

And when he speaks to you believe in him, though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.

Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun, so shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself. He threshes you to make you naked. He sifts you to free you from your husks. He grinds you to whiteness. He kneads you until you are pliant; and then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast.

All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

But if in your fear you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure, then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing –floor into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not all of your tears.

Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself. Love possesses not nor would it be possessed; for love is sufficient unto love.

When you love you should not say, "God is in my heart," but rather, "I am in the heart of God." And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.

Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself. But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires: To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night, to know the pain of too much tenderness, to be wounded by your own understanding of love, and to bleed willingly and joyfully, to wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving, to rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy, to return home at eventide

with gratitude, and then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise on your lips. Amen.