

**The Rectory
Rectory Close
Radyr CF15 8EW
vicki.burrows@me.com
Tel 029 20842417 or 07515 965781**

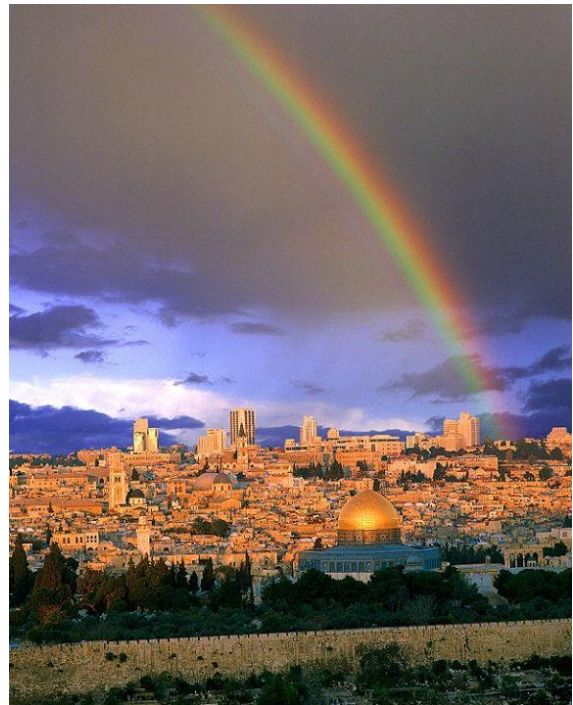
Dear Friends,

*I have set my bow in the clouds,
And it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth (Genesis 9. 8-17)*

A year has nearly passed since the Covid disruption of our lives began. As a people of faith we miss the opportunity to gather, to worship, to pray, and to explore our faith together. Week by week I find myself spending time trying to make worship on line creative, real and life-giving. I guess I am not alone when I admit that I still struggle to feel the connections but those without the ability to join in worship on line have lost the ability to join in any corporate worship. I sometimes wonder how that feels? I still miss standing with others confessing my sins, hearing words of forgiveness, exploring the biblical narrative and sharing a holy meal in person in our churches. I still miss the opportunity to make God's peace and feel God's blessing but above all I miss the sense of community and the touch of others. I know I'm not alone. Those who lead communities of faith are beginning to wonder what the future holds. Will some people come to believe they have no need of God? Have some discovered that they need God but no longer need to be part of a worshipping community? I suspect that when this pandemic passes there will be a mixed mode of finding faith and worshipping God in our buildings and on line. The live-streaming equipment soon to be installed in our churches will help us make this possible and maybe go some way to ending the sense of wilderness for those who are housebound now and in the future.

Without my connection with other people of faith sometimes I find myself going down rabbit holes! I need to wrestle with the biblical narrative with others as I seek to discover more about myself and God. When I skim through the Sunday texts without a bit of help I can so easily misinterpret and misunderstand the message. It is so easy to make God in my own image - easily tempted, fickle and sometimes angry! Yet that is not the story I find in either the Hebrew bible or the New Testament; God is love, compassion and forgiveness and, unlike me, resists temptation. God, if the story is to be believed, once upon a time put up a reminder to ensure this would be so.

The stories from the Hebrew bible that we will explore week by week this Lent concern God's covenant with creation and indeed with humanity. As Lent begins we hear a snippet from the old yet familiar flood story. It tells of God's love and faithfulness despite appearances - it was probably written when the children of Israel were in exile. The narrator relates some of their historical experiences of loss through a flood story that had been circulating in various forms and in other places for many years. Even in the midst of their wilderness suffering over some 40 years God acts to create a new covenant, not just with one family but with all the creatures of the earth. How does he do this? He takes a bow, which was the sign of war and hostility, and hangs it in the sky as a sign, a self-reminder even that never again will he be an aggressor. This is God's sign of peace, with and for the world. "This is the sign" God says, "that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generationsit shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth".



Just as we need our Post-it notes on our desks and our reminders on our fridges, here in Genesis God reminds himself twice that never again will he seek revenge. The bow in the sky is the Post-It note of the covenant established between, "me and all the earth".

Do not believe those who say that Covid, Aids, Cancer, or any form of suffering in your life is God's punishment. Do not ask yourself "what have I done to deserve this?" intimating God has abandoned you. Do not believe that if you had prayed harder, loved more deeply, worshipped more faithfully your life would have been free from suffering. No, we are weak and vulnerable human beings. But do remember that even God forgets. God we are told has the capacity to be negative, perhaps even destructive, but only by self-reminder and the willingness to be righteous and merciful does God restrain God's own self and bring peace. Yes it is counter-intuitive. This is God's joyful story, God is pure love and we believe we have seen it in the life of Jesus.

The bow in the sky, glorious though it is, is not simply a beautiful image, any more than the rainbow at the end of the yellow brick road, but in story form it tells us that the bow helps God to be God's perfect self offered in covenant to all creation. When the sons and daughters of Israel see the rainbow they can reflect; survivors and exiles can know we are not under threat.



In Mark's gospel, immediately after his baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit of God out into the wilderness where for 40 days he was tempted by Satan. We are told he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him. Mark does not say more than this so, for this year, forget stones and bread, the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, or the kingdoms of the world. In Mark's gospel Jesus just goes to the place where John the Baptist has gone. He spends time in the place where repentance brings life. The number forty in the biblical narrative always speaks of a long period of time. It reminds us of the flood, the years wandering in the wilderness and the flight of Elijah. In all these stories life is saved even in the face of threat and danger. Satan stalks, beasts threaten, angels protect. The scene is set clearly.

But do tell me, who is Satan? And where is the wilderness? Is Satan another person, thing, power or authority who comes to play with me, taunt and tempt me? Is Satan, or the devil if you like that language, beyond myself or is this the darkness within me and yes also beyond me that has the power to possess me. And who are these angels? Are not angels merely messengers? After all, that is the accurate translation. Do angels really have wings or was that an idea simply picked up long ago in Egypt? Could angels be those individuals whose lives shine with the radiant spirit of love, compassion and forgiveness? You must decide.

This Lent, as each year in Lent, we are invited to take time out for some self-reflection. One thing is for sure, we will meet both beasts and angels in the days ahead. The ancient practises of giving up, giving to others and spending time in prayer are well tried but do they work?

I hope many of you are reading Trystan's daily devotional readings in "Opening Our Lives" and that some of you will join our Lent Group each week on Tuesdays at 7.30pm on Zoom. Lent is the perfect opportunity to reflect on our journey, our care for self, for others and for all creation and perhaps grow in holiness and faithfulness too.

With love,

Vicki
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