

The family was gathered again at the bedside
in the trauma unit at Harborview Hospital in Seattle.

They were keeping a lonely vigil over their son, who had been
in a frightful auto crash and suffered life-threatening injuries.

For days on end, he had breathed with the help of a ventilator.
He had not moved, nor opened his eyes, nor spoken.

“It could go either way,” the doctor told his parents bluntly.

Then one Saturday evening, as his mother and father held his hand and prayed
with him, there came a tiny movement – his hand squeezing theirs
ever so slightly.

They looked at his face and saw a tear at the corner of his eye.

In that moment the mother and father embraced one another
and wept joyful tears of their own.

“It was a SIGN to me,” said his mother.

“A sign that told me he might come back to us...that there is still HOPE!”

We humans need such signs of HOPE in this disaster-filled world,
where earthquakes rumble and hurricanes roar,
where madmen’s bullets and auto crashes end children’s dreams,
and where the greatest tragedy remains our human STUPIDITY AND SIN.

We need something that will lift our eyes, stir our spirits, and
restore our faith.

How about you? Would you like a SIGN of HOPE?

Well then, child, look and listen, and I will give you one – a sign both
ancient and enduring, and exquisitely beautiful –

THE RAINBOW SIGN

It came, the Bible tells us, right on the heels of the greatest of all disasters in history –
the FLOOD that very nearly wiped the human race off the map.

As the scene opens, we see eight people – Noah and his family.
They have just emerged from the ark after spending a year and ten days
cooped up with each other and all those smelly animals.

Can you imagine the vision of devastation that met their eyes?
Dead people. The bloated carcasses of animals.
The ruination of everything that comprised the civilized world.

How would you feel if you discovered that your family was the only one left
on earth...
and the future was entirely in your hands?

“WHAT A MESS!” I can hear them saying. “Where do we go from here?”

Now comes God’s answer:

READ THE TEXT

A Rainbow! God gave them a rainbow!

Not the sort of thing we’ve come to expect in the wake of a disaster.
We’re more accustomed to seeing the National Guard, and hastily-erected tent
shelters. Volunteers at the back of open semi-trailers, distributing
distilled water and K-rations.

But since God is GOD and not the national Guard, Noah got something better...
a RAINBOW. That is to say, a RAINBOW SIGN.

A SIGN, first of all, to assure Noah that God was still there,
even in the aftermath of disaster.

It’s as if he were saying to Noah,
“I know you’re overwhelmed. So stop and look UP. Take heart.
I’m here. And I am still at work.”

Is that what you see when you look at a rainbow?
Or have we modern folks grown so jaded, so foggy in our vision,
that to us a rainbow is nothing more than sunlight refracted on water?

**If we knew how to look at life through God’s eyes, wrote French priest
Michel Quoist, we would see it as innumerable tokens of the love
of the Creator.**

Children know. They have not grown too old to see.

Many years ago our family had finished eating supper at a restaurant in Bend, Oregon.

We emerged just as the sun was setting. We stopped and looked appreciatively. Our daughter, just a toddler, announced to us,
“GOD PAINTED THAT!”

“Look,” God said to Noah. “Just look at that. I painted it, and now I give it to you as a sign, so that you will not forget that I am here, and I am at work.”

Ah, but WHAT WORK?

For life is complex and confusing, and even for us who are convinced there IS a God, there remains a lot of confusion about what He’s up to.

So listen further, for with the RAINBOW SIGN comes an explanation:

This, God tells Noah, is the sign of the COVENANT I make between me and the world, that never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.

Why did God choose a RAINBOW as the sign of His promise?

Because it is a picture-word...

The Hebrew word for RAINBOW is actually the word used everywhere else for a soldier’s bow – one used to shoot arrows, to make WAR!

The RAINBOW was a sign that God had made a decision.

NEVER AGAIN! He said. “I have hung up my bow!”

NEVER AGAIN will I use a flood.

NEVER AGAIN will I respond to human sin

with the sheer force of my anger. I WILL USE ANOTHER WAY!

God’s decision reminds me of what a teacher might do with a troublesome student.

Perhaps the teacher has butted heads with a defiant child again and again.

There are penalties, detentions, and even expulsions.

But it isn’t working. The student is still defiant.

So the teacher decides, at some cost and risk, to try another approach.

Decides to reach out with patience, extra listening, extra love.

The RAINBOW is a sign
that God has decided to come at sin, not with FORCE, but with GRACE.

Not an easy decision for a just and holy God who hates sin!

So He puts the rainbow in the sky,
not only to remind NOAH, but to remind HIMSELF!

When the bow is in the clouds, he says, I will look upon it and remember.

Aren't you glad God keeps looking...and remembering?

For if there were no RAINBOW SIGN,
then every few generations there would have had to come
yet another devastating punishment on this violent world. Another Flood.
And then another!

And if there had been no RAINBOW SIGN,
then every time I sinned...of you did...we could expect some dread
disease, some snakebite, some bolt of lightning in answer.
None of us would have reached adulthood!
Human life would be short and bitter, and all would soon end.

Ah, but there is no LIGHTNING BOLT. There is instead a RAINBOW.
Not because we haven't sinned,
but because God has decided to be gracious.

As God unfolded His plan of Grace, the Rainbow Sign was followed by other signs.

For Abraham, CIRCUMCISION,
the sign God had chosen Him and his descendants
to be the vehicle of that covenant blessing.

For Moses and the Israelites, it was a LAMB'S BLOOD ON THE DOOR,
the sign that God would "pass over" their houses
and liberate them from slavery in Egypt.

Much later, to the shepherds on Bethlehem's hills, a sign announced by ANGELS:
**This shall be a sign to you: you shall find a BABE wrapped in swaddling
clothes and lying in a manger.**

That baby grew to manhood,

and the astonishing things He did – the healing and feeding and making water into wine and the driving out of demons – were also called “SIGNS” – to open deaf ears and hard hearts and awaken FAITH.

And then, “on a hill far away” – came the clearest and most gracious SIGN of all – that wooden cross, where God said finally and unmistakably, “I LOVE YOU” and “I FORGIVE YOU.”

Have you seen the signs? Got the message?

Years ago, a farm boy from Iowa had a falling out with his parents. In anger he packed his things, left home, and enlisted in the army. He made no contact with his parents in the years that followed, and his own bitterness grew deep and hard.

Then came World War II, and that young man was thrown into the horrors of death and destruction. His heart was changed. Now, he realized, he wanted to come back home, but after the heartache and years of neglect, would his parents have him back?

He wanted to travel home, but dreaded what he might find. Would they bar the door? Refuse him? Tell him never to come back? Too frightened to phone, he took pen in hand and wrote a letter. It said,

Dear father and mother,

I realize that I have not seen you or even communicated with you in years. I would like very much to come home, but I don't know how you will feel about that. I have bought a train ticket, and I will be coming home on August 12. If you have forgiven me, and if you still want me, please tie a white ribbon around the tree by the tracks. That will be my sign to come home. If I don't see anything, I will stay on the train, and you will not have to deal with me any more.

The day came, and the young man rode that train across the broad field of Iowa. As he went, his sense of dread grew. As he approached the town, he could not bear to look.

But he did not have to, for a moment later the conductor cried out to the passengers, “WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT! A WHOLE TREE COVERED IN WHITE RIBBONS!”

God has done that very thing.

He gives us not one sign only, but a whole TREE FULL of them...
every one saying that He chooses to be patient with a world that has scorned Him,
gracious to each one of us when we stumble and fall.

How is it with you, my FEARFUL FRIEND?

When you think sin is too awful and there must be a limit to God's love,
look up and see the sign called the CROSS that says,
GOD'S LOVE HAS NO LIMIT

And when you despair because it looks like death finally wins in the end
and all we do is in vain,
look up and see that EMPTY TOMB...a sure sign that
GOD'S LOVE WILL CONQUER DEATH

And if you think all this is for somebody else and not you,
remember the WATER OF YOUR BAPTISM
the sign in which God said "YOU ARE MINE!"

"Just look!" Noah cried out to his family. "Just look at that rainbow!"

There it was, big and bold and beautiful,
hanging in the sky like a banner.

You there. Come and stand beside old Noah.

When you look at this twisted world
and wonder how long things can go on before lightning strikes,
look up and see the RAINBOW sign that says, GOD IS PATIENT!

He is. He was. He will be.

Take heart as you look at THE RAINBOW SIGN.