

## Why Are We Still Talking About This?

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and faithful unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

This is the first Sunday in Lent and our Lenten theme this year is: Who are we, as Christians? My answer this week is: We are an Open and Affirming congregation. The answer to this question every week will be something that we likely have already committed to, which means that I may be preaching to the choir. So it's probable that everyone listening to me will agree 100% or, close to that, with what I'm saying. And that could make anyone ask, then why say it? If we all know it and all agree on it, why should we talk about it?

Well, we talk about it because scripture suggests that it's important to do so. Our Old Testament lesson this morning tells us the end of the story of Noah's Ark. It's probably a story we're familiar with. God becomes enraged at the evil of the world and so God wipes it clean with a flood, leaving only Noah's family and a set of all the animals. At the end of this, God repents and decides that, no matter how evil the world is, God won't destroy it again like that. So God makes a covenant with Noah and all of creation, that God will never again destroy the world with a flood. And, as a sign of that covenant, God puts a rainbow in the sky.

Now, since God is God, I would imagine that God does not need this kind of reminder. We can trust that God will keep God's word without a handshake or a contract or a rainbow. But God puts that rainbow in the sky anyway and specifically tells Noah what it means. This tells us that there's something important about the symbols of our covenants.

Symbols of covenants are visual and public reminders of a promise. In the case of our story, we know that every time we see a rainbow in the sky, we are reminded that God has promised to self-limit God's power to destroy us, knowing full well that people will sin and hurt God. So any time we become afraid that maybe things have gone to far on earth and God will wipe us out or God's anger will go too far, we can look up and see that rainbow and remember God's everlasting love.

So symbols of covenants provide a powerful effect on the recipient of the covenant. This tells us that our own rainbow symbol—the symbol of our Open and Affirming Covenant, can have a powerful effect. And we know that this is true because we've seen it. I have only been at this church a short time and I have already been told several times how much it means to people that we are openly, publicly Open and Affirming. One couple told me that they got a list of all of the Open and Affirming churches in the area, but chose ours because our webpage was one of the only ones that does more than give lip service to being Open and Affirming. Straight ally candidates for jobs here have told me that they wouldn't have

applied if we were not Open and Affirming. And I have heard story after story of people who were hurt by their former church “homes,” told that they were going to go to hell for being who they are. But here, they felt loved and accepted because our commitment is stated with word, symbol and action.

I don't think that I can overstate how important this is. In our nation and around the world, transgender and gender non-conforming people are still brutalized and murdered for being who they are. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual kids are still bullied at school and some have become so depressed that they commit suicide. Many of us know stories of our LGTBQ+ siblings who cannot be out in their families or at work for fear that they will lose their jobs. They need our rainbow. They need the symbol that tells them that they are loved, and that they, too, are image bearers of God.

But there is a second half of the covenant and that is the promise given, the promiser. In Noah's story, God says that They put the rainbow in the sky so that, “When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh.” God also wants a reminder of God's promise.

This seems to suggest that we, too, need reminders of our promises, not just for the sake of the one we're making the promises to, but for our own sake. Why? I think our New Testament reading helps answer this question. In that story, Jesus asks to be baptized by John, humbling himself, repenting, and accepting his

call. God tells him that he is God's beloved and that God is well-pleased. He has made his covenant with God. But then, immediately, he goes into the wilderness and is tempted by evil.

This story suggests that our covenants and our calls will be threatened from time to time. We all find ourselves in wildernesses of some kind—wildernesses that tempt us to turn away from our convictions. If it happened to Jesus, it certainly will happen to regular people. The wilderness that threatens an Open and Affirming covenant is, perhaps, not what we would expect. Rather than make us turn away from our convictions all together, it's a wilderness that tempts us with complacency and judgment. Complacency can tempt us into believing that we know everything we need to know, since we have gone through the Open and Affirming process. But is that true? Whether we're straight allies, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Is that true? Whether we're pansexual, asexual, intersex, or two-spirit, do we know everything about LGBTQ+ lives and experiences? Do we all know what gender fluidity is? Do we know what it means to be asexual and do we accept asexuals into our communities? Do we have certain expectations for how a gay or lesbian person "should" act, or for how a transgender person should dress? Do we make judgments about what being gay or lesbian means because of our own or our friends' experiences? Do we keep trying to learn? We cannot possibly know everything about LGBTQ+ lives and experiences because they are as multiple as there are people.

Take the story I told during Fresh Perspectives. Magnus' friend is gender fluid, so she dresses to represent who she is on any given day. Accepting her and loving her as she is means for Magnus that he sets aside any confusion or annoyance that he might have by this fluidity. Instead, he is willing to shift his use of pronouns when necessary, that he makes an active effort to see Alex as Alex sees herself on any given day.

As covenant makers, we need periodic reminders of who we are, what we believe, and what we have covenanted to do and be so that we don't become tempted by complacency and judgment. We need to keep talking about our covenant and preach to the choir. And, following the example of our God, we need to boldly place our rainbows in the sky both for the sake of others and for ourselves. We need to face down any frustrations we have and seek knowledge so that, following in the footsteps of Jesus, we, too, can walk out of that wilderness and proclaim the Good News of God's love to all. Amen.