

### How Wide is God's Scarf?

How many of you have been watching the Winter Olympics? What are some of your favorite events?

And how many saw the opening ceremonies? There's something inspiring and downright hopeful about seeing all those world class athletes from so many different countries, each with their own unique flag, process in together in such a spirit of joyful togetherness.

Especially inspiring and hopeful was watching as the combined South Korea-North Korea Olympic team walked in. These two countries have been bitter enemies since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Several years ago North Korea was labeled by then President George W. Bush as part of the so-called "axis of evil." And during the past year President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il have engaged in a running war of words, occasionally accentuated by the North Korean military testing yet another ballistic missile.

And now, seemingly out of the blue, North and South Korea have come together to compete in the Olympics under one flag. In South Korea. What's happening? Is peace breaking out?!

Guess what the slogan for the 2018 Olympics is. (Does anyone know?) "Peace in Motion." That multivalency phrase could certainly refer to the visual beauty of the Winter Olympics, in which athletes from all over the world, some of whom are supposed to be enemies of each other, compete together in a spirit of peace and friendship. But the slogan also aptly described the opening ceremonies themselves. As the drama unfolded, an 80-year old South Korean man sang an ancient Korean folk song known as "Arirang." Often considered the unofficial national anthem of Korea, this song is equally beloved and widely known in both North and South Korea, and is learned by schoolchildren as early as the third grade. The folk song itself is a simple love song that poignantly combines joy and longing with sadness and regret.

What does this have to do with our scripture lesson about Noah, the flood, God, and the rainbow? We might say that this is a story about peace breaking out. More importantly, it's a story about God's love for the world God created, a love that is as wide as it is deep, a love that led to God changing God's own mind.

You all know the story. God had created the world's first couple, along with the beautiful Garden of Eden as a place for them to live in, perfectly and peacefully. But within a few short chapters, the beauty turned ugly, starting with the jealous murder of one of the first couple's sons by the other. And by the time we get to Chapter Six we are told that "the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great," that "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually," that "the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind," and had decided to "blot" them out from the earth."

All except for Noah and his family, who alone had found favor with God. So God first advises Noah to build a boat, then sends a flood to wipe out the world. After forty days and forty nights the flood waters finally subside, and Noah and his family emerge from the Ark, together with one male and one female of every kind of non-human creature God had created. God tells them all to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." It was basically a brand new start. And

as we heard from this morning's portion of the story, God promises Noah to never again destroy the world with a flood, or presumably any other way, and then puts the rainbow in the sky as a perpetual sign of God's promise. It's your classic do-over with a happily-ever-after ending. Except we don't have to read too much further before we learn that humankind kept on being wicked, starting with Noah himself and his drunken bender, and getting progressively worse through the rest of the Old Testament right on up through the New, right up to today, painfully summarized by President Trump's and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un's tit-for-tat war of words with one another. And we can't help but worry, God's promise notwithstanding, what's to keep him from destroying the world all over again? I mean, really: if it happened once, it could happen again, and now is probably as good—or I should say, as bad—a time as ever. At the surface of today's story, the answer is a simple one, namely God's promise to Noah. But at a deeper level, the answer is much more finely nuanced.

What changed between the pre-flood and post-flood worlds? Clearly it wasn't humankind. Our world is just as fallen as ever, or at least, our world's human inhabitants. Which can only mean that it was God who changed. Or at least, God's mind, God's plan for the world, God's approach.

When the writers of Genesis wanted to make a point or emphasize a truth, they used repetition. Lots of repetition. I don't know if you noticed it as Fiona was reading, but there were a number of different words and word phrases that recurred multiple times during the span of ten relatively short verses. The word phrase "all flesh," for example, recurred four times. So did the word phrase "every living creature." The word "between" recurred four times. The word "with" six times. And there was one word that recurred seven times, namely the word "covenant." "As for me," God says in verse 9, "I am establishing my covenant . . . with you and your descendants after you . . . 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."

A covenant is a promise or binding agreement between two or more parties. Today we might speak, for example, of a marriage covenant, expressed through spoken vows and typically symbolized by rings worn on the left "ring finger" of each. The marriage covenant is considered to be forever, for life.

In the Old Testament God makes a series of covenants with God's people, starting with Noah and his family, then Abraham and his descendants, then Moses and all the children of Israel, then David, and finally Jeremiah. Some of these covenants were bi-lateral or multi-directional, notably the covenant God made with Moses and the rest of the Israelites, in which God promised or covenanted to be their God, in return for them following God's laws and commandments. But some of the biblical covenants were unilateral or unidirectional, notably the covenant we're talking about today which God made with Noah. In which God promises to never again destroy the world, in return for . . . what? Nothing. Noah and his family didn't need to promise or do anything. The promising was only on the part of God. We might think of the covenant with Noah as God's "Plan B" when Plan A didn't work out. God had set out to make a perfect world. Or at least a "very good" world, a peaceful world. But God discovered that God could either create them in God's own image, or give them free will, but couldn't do both. So God had two choices: either wipe them all out a second time and consider it a failed experiment, or accept that humankind would be perennially imperfect and unpeaceful. Here is how one commentator put it:

*This covenant is the divine response to a theological irresistible force paradox: God's unstoppable purpose to create a peaceful cosmos collided with God's immovable compassion for*

*destructive, recalcitrant humanity . . . God accepted self-imposed and unilateral boundaries. ‘As for me . . .,’ God vows, ‘never . . . never . . . never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ As a celestial memory aid, God pledges to set in gathering clouds his war bow, unstrung and pointing away from earth, where, God says, ‘I will see it and remember’ the covenant. God places a restraining order against God’s self to defuse brutal retaliation upon unrestrained, violent creation and sets a sign in the sky to see and remember the vow.*

In other words, God makes the difficult choice to hang in there with humankind for the long haul.

As I mentioned above, this story also emphasizes through repetition that God’s covenant isn’t just with Noah and his family, but with “all flesh”; and it isn’t just with humankind, but with “every living creature” that is on the earth. In other words, to quote the commentator again,

*“this covenant also reveals the unity of all creation, the intractable sinfulness and undeserved blessedness of humanity, and all creation’s total dependence upon God’s active compassion . . . the deep purpose of nature is diversity in unity under God’s ownership. Yet humanity consistently fails to accept its given limits and attempts to take possession of life into its own hands, contaminating the cosmos with violence and fear.”*

But every once in a while—every two years, to be exact—come the Olympics. Inspiring and hopeful from opening ceremonies to closing. Reminding humankind that we can do better. Think of it as another rainbow God has given to us.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, and during the course of the season we will look in turn at each of the Old Testament covenants God made with God’s people, and then we’ll look in the New Testament where God tells the story of a “new covenant” with God’s people. A story which begins with Jesus emerging out of his baptismal waters only to enter a wilderness world inhabited by Satan, wild beasts, and angels. To conclude with some final words from my commentator,

*“Will Jesus fall prey to nature’s ancient violent pattern; or will he lead the angels, the earth, and even the wild beasts in a return to primeval harmony under a restored, peacemaking humanity? The answer is found by those who follow him into present wilderness temptations and come face to face with their own wild natures. Only those who travel the rocky way of Lent through the chaos of Good Friday and the silent void of the grave can hope to see Easter dawn, whose light will reveal a rainbow in the dark western sky behind them.”*

How wide is God’s scarf, God’s forbearance, God’s love? Infinitely wide.

Amen.