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Genesis 9:13, NRSV.

¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Not a Weapon, But a Rainbow.

In Chapter 10 of the Gospel of John, Jesus is inside the Temple. It is the Festival of Dedication: Hanukkah. Religious leaders of his day are pressuring him to clearly state that he is the Messiah. This would give them grounds to charge him with religious blasphemy under Jewish law or with open rebellion in Roman courts. Jesus has been quite successful in his ministry – and his growing popularity is a threat to their authority. Here is how Jesus responds to their demand:

“I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

As he so frequently does, Jesus reveals himself to be quite clever. He does not directly answer the question. Rather, he says that his actions and his previous words form the answer to the religious authorities. Let’s focus on the last half verse: *“No one will snatch them out of my hand.”* Jesus says that if we accept him,

we have spiritual protection and guidance, and we have an eternal future under the hand of God. Up against faith, the Temple authorities are powerless.

These are the last two verses of Chapter 8 of Paul's letter to the Romans:

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In this chapter, Paul focuses on what it means to have a life with the Holy Spirit.

Paul has asked himself a rhetorical question: what can separate us from Christ?

The answer is that if we have faith – nothing. Paul is referring to physical death and physical life, that passing away as a living human does not remove the faithful from God's hands. When he speaks of "*angels*" and "*rulers*", he's telling us that nothing in this world, and in fact not even the most powerful cosmic forces, can cast us from the Kingdom of God if we believe. When he says, "*nor height, nor depth*", remember that people of his time and place had no understanding of the universe. They knew about the five classical planets, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, but the word "planet" comes from the Greek word for "*wanderer*", meaning that they only knew that the planets seemed to move across the horizon, unlike other stars that appeared fixed: they did not know they were actually planets like Earth. "*nor height, nor depth*" was Paul's way of

referring to the entire extent of whatever is out there. He's saying that we cannot imagine anything that can remove us from the protection and guidance of God.

Here is something very poetic, from the words of Jesus, from Chapter 10 of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has sent seventy believers ahead of him into the towns and rural places he is about to go to. They have been told to travel with extreme minimalism, as lightly as possible: no money bags, no pairs of extra sandals, no bags, nothing. They are to focus only on preaching about the Kingdom of God, healing those who are sick, and taking refuge with those who will welcome them. They have completed their mission, and Jesus welcomes them with joy:

"I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹ See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Jesus has empowered those who evangelize for him to survive poisonous snakes and enemies who would attack them for their faith. But Jesus tells them that this is not the reason they should rejoice. Rather, it is simply their faith, their lives in the Kingdom of God that they should celebrate. We have the same gift today, as members of the Kingdom - the same reason to rejoice as the 70 missionaries.

As a chaplain, I have had multiple people who are facing impending death, long roads to recovery, or the loss of a spouse tell me that it has tested their faith.

Sometimes it has made them question God or become angry with God. I don't blame anyone for feeling this way. But I learned a different perspective many years before this, when I was a boy. I think I have mentioned that I had a friend in Grammar School who had several siblings. His father died of lung cancer, and his mother remarried. Oliver's new father turned out to be hardworking and caring: he immediately began treating all seven kids like they were his own, and he later adopted them. But it was a while before Oliver's new dad figured out which of the seven kids was which. One day, I went over to Oliver's house and knocked on the front door. When his new father answered, I asked if Oliver could come out and play. He smiled warmly, and said: "Which one is Oliver?"

Here is perhaps the most uplifting statement attributed to Jesus. These are the last words of the Gospel of Matthew. They are nominally directed toward the Apostles, as he gives them the Great Commission:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

But the Great Commission applies to all of us, as we inherit the mission to make disciples of other people. We teach by example and with our words: everyone should follow the commands that Jesus gave us.

We've looked at New Testament passages that speak to the loyalty of God to his people, and importantly, to the fact that once we have faith, God will never let us wander away. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that *"No one will snatch them out of my hand."* Paul tells us that no power on Earth or in Heaven *"will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"*. And in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells us to relax and *"rejoice that your names are written in heaven"*. We've heard Jesus proclaim that he is with us, *"to the end of the age"*, which refers to the end of time, when the universe as we know it ceases to exist.

Compare these passages to a promise that God makes to Noah's family after the big flood, when, at least according to the allegorical tale told in Genesis, God concludes that never again will he essentially reset humanity by destroying all people except a tiny root, the family of Noah. After the flood, and throughout the history presented in the Hebrew Scriptures, God does indeed use his authority to punish evil – and even allows the killing of many of the Chosen People. But after these disasters, there were always surviving "remnants" that were far larger than a single family. This happened after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, after the Assyrian Empire destroyed the Northern Kingdom, after the Babylonian exile of the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and during the time of Elijah, when a remnant of 7,000 people who do not worship Baal remain

true to God. Here is the story of God's promise in Genesis 9. Note the phrase "¹³ / *have set my bow in the clouds*" at the end of the passage:

⁸ Then 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, ¹⁰ and 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. ¹¹ I 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." ¹² God 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: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

God makes the promise "*that never again shall all flesh be cut off.*" Again, God may punish in the future, but never again, will humanity be essentially restarted.

There is one verse in this passage that reads "¹³ *I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.*" Most people think that, given there has been a flood, this "bow" in the clouds is a rainbow. But the Hebrew word in the original Scripture is "*qeshet*". It refers to a bow as in a bow and arrow, in other words, an archer's bow – a weapon. The generally accepted interpretation of this is a bit complex. The idea is that this "bow" is oriented like a rainbow, in other words, the arrows would shoot upward, not at the Earth, indicating that there will be no more of these "attacks" on all of humanity. The author is being very clever. He uses the word for a military bow, but visualizes it as a true rainbow, thus turning a weapon of war into a sign of

peace and calm after a massive “storm”. This shows us that God can take a deadly power – his former determination to crush humanity and start from scratch – and turn it into a new covenant between God and his people, represented by the family of Noah. That is the reason I wanted to talk about this passage from after the flood: this is considered by scholars to be a Covenant between God and his people.

Yes. We tend to think of the “Old” and the “New” Covenants, or the “Mosaic” Covenant and the Covenant brought by Jesus. In truth, depending on the criteria used to define a Covenant, scholars count between 5 and 7 Covenants in the Bible. Here is the longer list, the one that identifies seven covenants:

1. The Adam and Eve Covenant, called the Adamic-Edenic Covenant, where God makes an agreement with Adam and Eve in Eden, where Adam and Eve agree to live with innocence and responsibility, but of course, end up failing to do so.
2. The Noahic Covenant, where God destroys almost all life, but then promises that he will never destroy on such a devastating scale again.
3. The Abrahamic Covenant, where God promises Abraham a vast lineage, along with land, and a blessing for the nations founded by his family.
4. The Mosaic Covenant, where God, via Moses, gives the moral Law to the Israelites at Mount Sinai; God also supplies guidelines on building the tabernacle,

which is where God resides, the rituals and offerings for the sacrificial system, specifications for the various festivals, and the nature of the priesthood.

5. The Palestinian Covenant, sometimes called the Land Covenant, and which is sometimes considered part of the Mosaic Covenant, where God gives the Israelites rights and duties with respect to populating the Promised Land.

6. The Davidic Covenant, where God establishes the lineage of David, of which Jesus becomes a member, and God promises David that his royal dynasty will endure for eternity. We see Jesus as the fulfillment of this second promise.

7. The New Covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah and introduced by Jesus, whereby we are offered regeneration and forgiveness through faith alone.

We often confuse the Mosaic Covenant with the Abrahamic Covenant. It is to Abraham, long before the land of Canaan is settled, that God promises progeny, a homeland, and God's blessing. The Mosaic Covenant is where the notion of the "Old" Law comes from. In between these two covenants are the Patriarchs, like Isaac and Jacob, the Egyptian slavery, and the desert Exodus.

Getting back to Oliver. Indeed, his father was quite the guy. He married a Catholic woman with seven children. He adopted those children, and although I don't think he had any previous experience as a dad, he did his absolute best to care for those kids, and that meant welcoming their friends, like me. At the front

door, after I identified Oliver as the second oldest, this man motioned me into the house with a big smile. He was a Christian man – but not a Catholic.

I remember the house looking the way it always had when Oliver's birth dad was alive, with the major exception of the removal of the hospital bed in the living room where Oliver's biological father had spent his final weeks. But there was one difference that perhaps I didn't notice that day I knocked on the front door but only discovered later. Oliver's father had put up an old tapestry that had been in his family. It was in the living room and contained the following line:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

There was a cross on this tapestry. Oliver's dad told me that it was the first line of a prayer by the founder of the Christian movement of which he was a member. He said that he had lost his first wife, and that he knew God would be with him until time has ended. God gave him not only a new wife, but seven beautiful children. He was not a Catholic. He said that a man named John Wesley had written it. Later, much, much later, I would learn that in truth John Wesley wrote this in 1755, but that he adapted it from an early Puritan writing by a man named Richard Alleine. Later, this was prayed by Methodists in the U.S. at the beginning of the New Year, as well as at other times, to reaffirm their relationships with God and their total trust in and full dependency on God.

The prayer tells us that we serve God and that we are willing to suffer for God, and that we accept the good and the bad that comes with dedicating our lives to Christ. It is very much like a biblical covenant, in that it is an agreement between us and God – only we are the ones casting the words of this covenant. It is in response to the great gift that God gives us when he promises us that if we have faith, he will always be with us, that with faith, we can never be separated from God. Nothing can snatch us from God's hand, nothing can separate us from the love of God, and our names are written in Heaven. God is with us to the end of the age. And God keeps that covenant made with Noah, that his bow is not a weapon, but rather a rainbow. In return for this incredible gift, we offer this covenant prayer to God. The first line was on Oliver's dad's tapestry:

*"I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen."*