

Rainbows, Rivers and Continuing Creation

Gen. 9.12-17

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Norman Habel

About 15 years ago I lived in Largs Bay and would drive to work to the Underdale Campus of the University of SA. During the winter, as we drove into the parking lot, we would often see a rainbow in the Western sky. It was a delightful way to begin the morning. On one occasion, as my wife and I drove in, we saw, instead of the usual rainbow, a pure white rainbow. A white bow arched across the sky where the normal rainbow would be. Yes, a white rainbow!

My colleagues at the university laughed at me, told me I was seeing things and should stop reading stories of visions in the Bible. Fortunately my wife was with me to verify what I saw. In spite of the derision of my academic colleagues, I was moved by the sight to go back and explore the meaning of this sign as we face the future of our planet.

The Rainbow after the Flood

The first rainbow, you will recall, came after the Flood in the days of Noah. The first creation was filled with escalating violence that affected not only human beings but the very order of creation. God's planned creation had become a veritable chaos.

As a result, God returned creation almost back to the way things were at the beginning. God opened the windows of heaven and the waters above poured down. Then God opened the fountains of the deep, and the waters from below erupted as massive fountains. The result: the scene was like it was at the beginning of creation as described in the first verses of Genesis One. The Earth was covered with water and lay in darkness under the water waiting for God to uncover her.

But there was a difference. Instead of just the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, there was a bobbing boat. God was doing things differently the second time around. God saved some of the species of living creatures, including humans, to provide continuity with the first creation. Of course, most of the plants and other life forms would have perished after 12 months under water. Yes, the Flood lasted 12 months after 40 days and nights of rain! And God would have needed to create a whole new landscape with new vegetation for the creatures of the ark to enjoy.

Yes, the end of the flood marked a new creation, a new beginning. This is also signified by the fact that the Earth reappeared from under the waters on New Year's Day. And the rainbow is there, says, God, as a reminder that God will not use waters to destroy all of life and the face of Earth ever again. The rainbow is the promise that God will keep Earth alive, one way or another, in spite of human efforts to destroy it. Or, in other words, God will keep on creating even when other forces destroy.

The Ice Age

Reflect also for a moment on the Ice Age. From the research humans have done across Earth, it is clear that whenever the Ice Age may have happened, it was much like the Flood. The ice was so extensive and severe that thousands of species died and disappeared. We have fossils of thousands of species that no longer exist. We see them in museums. What we rarely hear, however, is that after the Ice Age God created many new species. That's right, just as God created many things anew after the Flood, God created new forms of life—everything from microbes to marsupials, from simple organisms to creatures with complex communication systems. God keeps creating and will keep creating.

Creatio Continua

I do not want you to think that this idea that God keeps creating is some modern concept that people like Habel promote. What I am talking about is an old and very important Christian teaching derived from the Bible. In Latin—which seems to capture the essence of things—this teaching is called *creatio continua*. In English we would translate the expression 'continuing creation' or 'creation continues'.

God did not retire after creation and leave nature run its course. God did not wind up creation like a watch and wait for time and life to tick away automatically. God did not give humans the job of caring for Earth and then watch through the windows of heaven. No! God has been creating and continues to create every instant of every day.

Using Rivers

One of the ways that we know God keeps creating you and me and all forms of life is by using the water in rivers. The flowing water in the river we see is indeed the water of life we need to survive. But it is also the very stuff God uses to create in the cycle of creation. The same waters of the Flood and the Ice Age are the very waters God uses to give us life, to create. There is a finite amount of H₂O on Earth, whether it is in the form of water, ice or moisture. And the fragments of H₂O, the little bits of water, are re-cycled endlessly. God keeps creating and sustaining life with the same water age after age and generation after generation. Water is the very essence of the cycle of creation.

Each of us begins life in a womb of water. Each of us is created in that womb with the same waters of life that flow through Earth. The amazing thing is that each embryo, each infant is created different. Even so-called identical twins are different. And even down to the genes hidden deep in each of us, the pattern is in each case a new creation. Yes, creation happens with every birth, with every breath, with every death.

Living Waters and Dying Rivers

The extraordinary thing is that in the past 100 years, human beings have done so much to turn these living waters into dying rivers. Water is the living stuff God uses for creating. We have allowed poisons from spraying crops to run down hillsides into streams.

Human beings have dumped industrial waste, including nuclear waste, into rivers until most of the fauna and flora have disappeared. Some rivers have become little more than sewers. Rains that fall in the city are polluted with emissions from our vehicles and other sources. We are turning the waters of life into rivers of death.

How could we take something so sacred and desecrate it?

Climate Change

Of course, the pollution involves more than rivers. The greenhouse effect and similar forces have led to global warming and climate changes that are affecting our whole planet. The growing crisis seems to me to be similar to the time of the Flood and the Ice Age. Much of life on Earth is again facing possible destruction.

The climate change is already happening. This is not a prediction of some fanatic. Within a hundred years the effects of what we have done to the atmosphere will mean many islands will be covered with water, other areas will be barren, many more species will have disappeared and many things will have changed radically—including our weather. I will probably not be here, but the climate change is already happening. And the rivers—some will dry up and new ones will flow.

Cosmic Christ in Creation

Where is Christ in all of this climate change, this turmoil and agony for Earth? Sitting in heaven inviting us to abandon Earth, to abandon ship as it were and join the celestial choirs? Or wandering to and fro on Earth looking for his faithful few to build another boat—or perhaps a space ship?

What we need to realise is that Christ is not separate from creation, but in creation. Christ may have risen, but the risen Christ is in with and under all of creation. This risen Christ in creation we call the cosmic Christ, the Christ who not only created all things but permeates and embraces all things—the entire cosmos.

The Suffering Christ

What do we know of this Christ? That he likes to be distant and view us all from some far off cloud? That he is not really involved with creation and life on Earth after his resurrection? That he has retired to sing with the celestial choir?

Hardly! The Christ we know is the suffering God. The Christ we know was willing to become a piece of creation, a real piece of Earth, a human being! The Christ we know was willing to suffer the most cruel of deaths for us, for what we have done. The Christ we know is not distant and unfeeling but here with us, suffering with us and for us.

And that means, Christ suffers because of what we have done to creation. Christ suffers with creation, with the rivers, with the waters, with Earth itself. Yes, Christ suffers with our polluted planet. Paul talks about this in Romans. He says that Earth is groaning because of the curses imposed upon it. But not only Earth. The Spirit of God groans because of the agony of Earth. And if the Spirit groans we know that Christ is suffering. For the risen Christ, who fills creation, is the same Christ we know from Calvary, from the cross.

And why does Earth groan? Why does Christ suffer with Earth? Because of the injustices done to Earth? Yes, but more. Earth is also groaning like a woman about to give birth with a child, says Paul. Earth is waiting for the new day, the new creation, the new birth, the time when Earth will be free from pollution and pain.

A Renewed Creation

So what can we expect? Another Flood? Some other disaster that results from the oncoming climate change? Rivers turning to blood as nations fight for the lands that survive climate change? Doom and more doom? No!

Whatever happens, we can expect God to keep God's promise and to keep creating! I suggest we can call these promises God's rainbow promises.

One thing we know, Christ will suffer with us and God will keep on creating on Earth as God promised. There may indeed be a transformed creation, an Earth that looks quite different just as it did after the Ice Age and the Flood. But we know that the Christ who suffers with us through this pain will bring us new life and hope. For Christ is the water of life not only for our spirit, but also for this Earth God has chosen as our home.

The chosen reading from the Book of Revelation confirms this. There, John dreams of the day when Earth will be healed and renewed and all the curses we have brought on creation will disappear. And the source of that renewal is a river of life that flows from Christ, the Lamb, through the city of God into all Earth to bring healing to all nations.

John is not talking about Earth being eliminated. Rather, his vision is one of a recreation of Earth, a rebirth. Once again, as after the Flood and the Ice Age, Earth becomes a place of vibrant life celebrating Christ as the source of all life—spirit and body.

Our task is to build an ark as Noah did. Our task is to find ways to preserve what is being destroyed, especially the sacred streams God uses to create life. Our task is to discern Christ suffering in our planet and to work with Christ in healing creation. Our task is to celebrate the unique creation that happens every day—even white rainbows!

Creation continua – creation continues! Let us celebrate this truth by joining Christ in the task of healing Earth wherever we happen to live. Amen

God's Seven Rainbow Promises for Creation
Creatio Continua

I promise to continue creating in, with, and under all creation.

I promise not to destroy Earth with water but to keep this life-blood of Earth flowing.

I promise that the crucified Christ will continue to suffer with creation while she is suffering under human sins.

I promise that the risen Christ, who fills all creation, will continue to heal all that is wounded in creation.

I promise that the Spirit will continue to renew all life impulses that animate this creation.

I promise that the Spirit will keep groaning until creation is free from the human curses upon it.

I promise that creation itself will continue to groan as a woman in childbirth until a new creation is born.