

One way is to tie a string on a finger. Or put a rubber band on your wrist. Me, I prefer writing on a Post-It note and sticking the paper in a prominent place. These days, many of us program our phones to ding or chirp or buzz. All which we do when we need a reminder.

Because Lord knows we need signals that prompt us to remember information. Customs that serve to jog our memories. Signs that remind us not to forget.

But the surprise of today's reading from Genesis is that even God needs a reminder.

The Genesis passage concludes the story of Noah's Ark. We tend to think of the story of Noah's Ark and its happy ending as a cozy children's tale, complete with a parade of fun animals, the drama of a dove-on-a-mission, and a fairy-tale ending with a rainbow finale. But the reading that lets us paint baby nurseries with its images forgets that the story of Noah and the Flood is also about destruction and devastation and vengeance.

Before telling Noah to build the ark and gather the animals, the story of Noah's Ark begins with the LORD seeing "that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). So the LORD becomes "sorry that he had made humankind on the earth," so sorry that "it grieved him to his heart" (6:6). So God decides, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air" (6:7).

As the Lord explains it to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them” (6:13). We don’t write that part in children’s Bibles...

And yet, what starts as a story of destruction ends in eternal armistice. What commences in violence concludes with peace. When the whole flood is said and done, the plan for divine destruction gives way to divine promise.

For in our passage today, God decides to lay down arms. The rainbow that God puts in the clouds is not just a bunch of pretty colors after the storm. It’s a BOW, as in “bow and arrow.” “I have set my bow in the clouds,” God says to Noah and Noah’s sons, “and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” God hangs the weapon of war up in the heavens as a way to say, “No more.” As a reminder never to destroy creation again. “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... When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant. ...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.”

Yes, when all is said and done, the devastation of the flood surrenders before a new commitment of faithfulness. A new promise that no matter what, no matter the sin or the mess God will remain faithful to all flesh.

God hangs up the bow; it will serve no longer as weapon for retaliation but as reminder of reconciliation, a sign that despite what comes, God will remain faithful to creation.

That is the essence of Noah's covenant. Through it all, God will remain faithful. God uses water to establish an unbreakable promise never again to flood or destroy the earth, but remain faithful to what God has made and saved. That is also the essence of our baptismal promise.

God uses water to establish an indelible commitment that no matter the wickedness of humankind or the continually evil thoughts and actions on our hearts, God will remain faithful to creation and to the promise of mercy.

That is the string or cell phone ding or Post-It that rainbow provides: It is the reminder to God--and, by extension, to God's people--that destruction is not the answer. Blotting out creation does not blot out the problem. So God commits and writes an eternal reminder to always choose another way: the way of mercy and forgiveness.

It is the way God chooses when picking a stable instead of a palace for a birthplace. It is the way that God takes in dying on a cross. It is the Spirit-led, cross-shaped path that our season of Lent highlights and bids us to follow: a way where destruction bows down before salvation where damage yields to renewal; and sin is swallowed up not only by water but also by mercy. To this way of mercy and forgiveness, God remains faithful.

AMEN.