

## **“Blessed Be the Bowties That (Un)Bind”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
February 18, 2024 - First Sunday in Lent

[Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15](#)

The bowstring was pulled back, the target was lined up, and the arrow was ready to fly. And then, after releasing the string, the arrow shot forward, and -- bullseye -- it was a perfect hit on the target's red center! This is what I envisioned would happen when I first used a real bow at a summer camp after my fourth grade year. But, sadly, the perfect strike I imagined did not align with reality as my first attempt(s) at archery were not at all successful. I don't recall hitting the target even once, but saw shot after shot fall short or veer off to the left or right. It was pretty clear from my summer camp experience that archery skills were not a natural gift that I possessed, and I can truly appreciate how those who are experts with the bow have developed their skills only through years of practice.

In the Ancient Near East, from which our first lesson from Genesis came, many people did develop such expert bow skills through years of training as hunters and warriors. And many of the different societies of Mesopotamia, like others throughout the ancient world, understood some of their gods to be practiced experts with the bow who skillfully and wrathfully unleashed volley after of volley of deadly darts against one another and upon the earth and its people.

Those living in ancient Israel were no exception, and they understood their God to be a bow-wielding and weather-controlling warrior who would fight with these weapons on their behalf against their enemies. But by the time the people of Israel were themselves conquered and living in captivity in Babylon, many no longer understood God to be their destroying warrior. Our reading from Genesis 9, likely formed sometime after Israel's exile, tells of how God, after unleashing a flood upon the earth and destroying almost all of it, took the war bow and forever set it down, facing away from the earth, and vowed to change and never more make war against the planet or its people. The rainbow serves as a sign for God to see to remember this covenant that God made with all of creation, that God would no longer destroy, but would instead create and re-create, bless and re-bless.

Our gospel lesson also tells of a shift in identity and activity in Jesus at his baptism, which was not a symbol of purification from sin but rather signified a change in identity, as though the old person went under the water, and a new person emerged. Jesus went into the water as the craftsman from Nazareth and came out of it being identified as God's beloved who would go on to the divine work of creation and re-creation, blessing and re-blessing, through healing, teaching, and saving people.

As we have come to this time of Lent, we are now in a season of reflection and re-imagination in our own lives. This is a time for us to consider how we might be holding onto the primeval way of destruction, taking up the war bow that God set down that we might do harm to others, rather than following God in setting down the bow of wrath and, instead of making war upon others, making peace. This is a season for us to remember our own baptism, a symbol of our new identity as Christ-followers, and to rededicate ourselves to following his creative way of giving and not taking from others. It is a season for us to become more of what God desires us to be that we might be a greater blessing to others and that we might be more greatly blessed.

In the rainbow, we have a symbol that not only reminds God of the vow to love and bless, but we have a sign to remind ourselves to also do the work of loving and blessing. In the rainbow, with its differing, vibrant colors, we see a sign that we can be bound together with those who differ from us, that though the reds and blues are distinctly different, they are still together in this bow and they each contribute to its beauty and goodness. And as the rainbow seems to link together even distant places, people who are far apart in any way can be linked together with one another when the bow of peace falls upon them and ties them together.

Friends, no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey, we are bound together by God's boundless love for us and our love for one another. And the more we can become bound together in love, the more we can become unbound by that which makes war on our lives and on our peace. Let's all embrace this bound and unbound part of our identity today, as our journey through Lent continues, and in all the days to follow. And may God's peace, like a gleaming pot of gold, enrich each of our hearts. Amen.