

July 29, 2018 – Genesis 9:8-17

Standing on the promises of Christ my King. Thru eternal ages let His praises ring. Glory in the highest I will shout and sing. Standing on the promises of God.

We don't sing this hymn a whole lot, mostly because it's not in our Lutheran Service Book. Why isn't it there? I have no clue. It's one of the most popular hymns in America. And I really can't see much theologically wrong with it. For whatever reason it just didn't make the cut.

But if there is a flaw with “Standing on the Promises”, I suppose it might be this: it doesn't really ever tell us how to stand on the promises of God. Or even what those promises are. That line is repeated over and over again. We're encouraged in every possible way, in the strongest possible terms, to stand on the promises of God. But what does that mean? And what are the promises of God?

Well, our Old Testament lesson tells us quite a bit about that. Because the life of Noah is one that is entirely devoted to standing on the promises of God. Everything he does stands on God's promises.

He's standing on God's promises when he hears and believes God's judgment on humanity. I mean, we take it for granted that when God comes to Noah and says, “There's going to be a massive flood,” that Noah believes him. But there's really no reason for him to do that.

Floods of any size did not happen prior to Noah. Because rain did not happen prior to Noah. The Bible says that the plants of the earth were kept watered by a mist on the ground. But there was no rain from the clouds. And floods just didn't happen. So when God comes to Noah and says, “I'm going to destroy the earth with a flood,” the first thing Noah has to believe is that there can be such a thing as a flood, and then second, that God's going to do it.

So Noah stands on that promise. The promise of God's wrath and judgment. The promise of God's Law. The promise that God does not tolerate sin forever. That when God says, “No,” he means it. That when God makes a threat, he follows through on it. That when God promises to bring down a seemingly impossible level of destruction on the earth, he'll do it.

But then, Noah also stands on the promise of God's salvation. The promise of the ark. The promise that this strange vessel that no one has ever built before will actually be seaworthy. That it will survive 40 days and 40 nights of rain and waves and turmoil.

That it will safely carry not only Noah and his family. But it will carry 2 of every kind of animal on the earth. And enough food to survive months at sea. And that after all of this is over, Noah and his family and the animals will get off this ark and survive in a planet that has been rendered a complete wasteland until it finally regrows and prospers.

But then finally, Noah stands on one more promise. The most important promise of all. He stands on the promise that God won't ever do this again. He'll never destroy the earth with water ever again. And that's a big promise.

Because, yes, God rescued Noah. And yes, that is a huge act of mercy. Both on Noah and on all of humanity. Before the Flood happens, in Genesis 6:6, it says that the Lord looked at the violent sinfulness of man and he was sorry that he had ever made us. When God says that he's sorry he ever made something, you don't expect it to be around much longer. But God preserves humanity.

Even if it means starting over with a single family. Even if it means essentially resetting the clock and starting creation all over again. God is patient and merciful. He doesn't snuff Adam and Eve out of existence when they sin. He doesn't snuff Cain out of existence after he sins. And he doesn't snuff all of humanity out in the Flood. So there is a lot of Gospel in this story.

But there's also a lot of Law. And as the Flood subsides and the door of the ark opens, Noah has to feel it. The fear of the Lord has to be weighing on Noah like a thousand pound boulder. He's got be thinking to himself, "Who is this God I worship and obey? Who is this God who just massacred thousands upon thousands of people?"

"And what's going to happen to me now? He spared me this time, but what about next time? What happens when I sin? Or my children? Or my grandchildren? Is he going to do this all over again? Is this what the history of the world is going to look like? A worldwide flood every thousand years, when God gets fed up with us?"

And so, having already fulfilled his first two promises – to flood the world and to rescue Noah's family from the flood – God makes a third promise: *"I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."*

It's a fairly limited promise, in many ways. God isn't promising that there will never again be any floods. We know that there are. He's not promising that he'll never destroy the earth again. We know that he will on the last day. He'll destroy it, not with water, but with fire.

But it still had to be reassuring to Noah. Because God is essentially saying here, "This isn't normal for me. This isn't who I am, really. I am not a God who likes to destroy things. I am not a God who likes to kill my own creation. This kind of work is alien to me. I don't want you to know me as the God who kills. I want you to know me as the God who saves. The God who saved you and all of your descendants and all of creation with you."

And then 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: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."*

I have set my bow in the clouds. I don't think we fully appreciate those words. When we think of rainbows, we think of something pretty. Something feminine. Unfortunately, in modern day society, maybe even something homosexual. And with our high and mighty knowledge of science and physics, we think of rainbows as an optical illusion. The diffraction of light in droplets of water. Nothing substantial, really.

And yet, what God says here is that he has set his bow in the clouds. Not the shape of a bow. His actual bow. His bow and arrow. His war bow. The thing he uses to strike down his enemies. He has set that bow in the clouds. As a covenant, a promise, that he is not just going to sit in heaven, shooting us down. He is not going to be a God of wrath on all humanity.

No, he's going to be a God of blessing. A God of salvation. It's not a coincidence that the next story after the account of the Flood is the story of humanity sinning greatly again. It's story of the Tower of Babel. But instead of wiping the earth clean with another flood, God responds very differently.

He scatters humanity to the four corners of the earth. And then he adopts one family to be his people. He comes to a man named Abram. And he tells him, "I made a promise with your ancestor Adam that I would send a savior. I made a promise with your ancestor Noah that I would put down my bow and would not destroy the earth with water. And now, I make a promise with you.

"A promise that you and your descendants will be my people. A promise that through you will come that long awaited savior. A promise that through that savior I will not destroy with water. No, by his work and through the washing of water in Holy Baptism, I will save my people from all their sins."

What does it mean to stand on the promises of God? Well, I think our text describes that nicely. *“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.”*

I will remember my covenant with you. God will remember his covenant with us. Not the other way around. The rainbow isn't there for our benefit. The rainbow is there for God's benefit. Not because he's forgetful and needs to be reminded or anything like that.

No, the point is that whether we live or die. Whether we receive God's blessings or his wrath. Whether we go to everlasting judgment or everlasting paradise. It's all in God's hands. He holds all the power here.

But he's also made all the promises. Promises to withhold his well-deserved punishment. Promises to have grace on sinful people. Promises to save those who aren't worth saving. Promises to make us his redeemed people and his chosen family. Promises to use simple things like water and bread and wine to forgive and renew and strengthen us every day of our lives.

Promises he has kept from the beginning of time till the end of time. And fulfilled through the death and resurrection of His Son. Who, like the rainbow for Noah, is our sign of the new promise that God has made with his people. That whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

These are the promises that we stand upon. And know that they will not fail. They cannot fail. For we are bound to our Savior by love's strong cord and rest in him as our all in all. Amen.