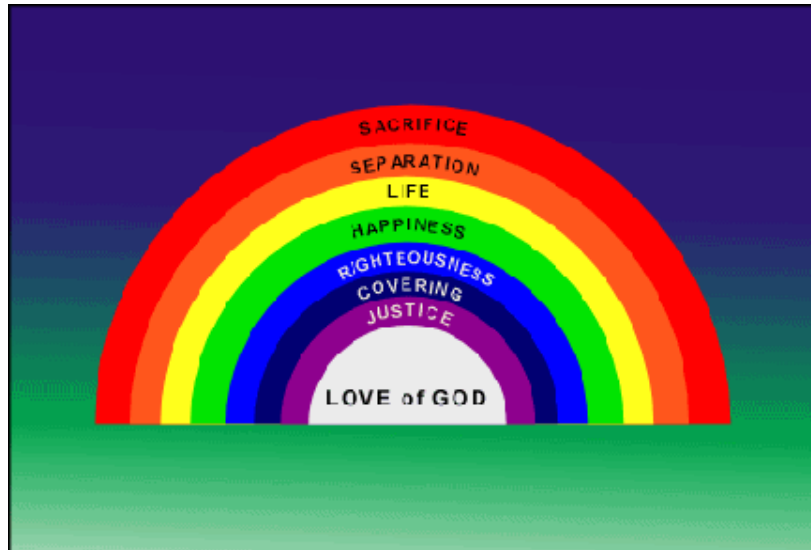


Symbols of faithful relationship

Rainbow:

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

Genesis 9:12-16



Idea:

Use the colours of the rainbow to represent different aspects of faithful relationship.

THE STORY OF THE RAINBOW

In ancient times people saw the rainbow as a symbol of peace and harmony. Ancient Hebrews recognized it as a special sign given by God that He wants all living things to live and flourish in peace and harmony.

'When the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember the everlasting covenant between me and all living beings' (Genesis 9.12-18).

Once upon a time all the colours in the world started to quarrel; each claimed that she was the best, the most important, the most useful, the favourite:

Green said: 'Clearly I am the most important. I am the sign of life and of hope. I was chosen for grass, trees, and leaves – without me all the animals would die. Look out over the countryside and you will see that I am in the majority.'

Blue interrupted: 'You only think about the earth, but consider the sky and the sea. Water is the basis of Life that is drawn up by the clouds from the blue sea. The sky gives space and peace and serenity. Without my peace you would all be nothing but busybodies.'

Yellow chuckled: 'You are all so serious. I bring laughter, gaiety and warmth into the world. The sun is yellow, the moon is yellow, and the stars are yellow. Every time you look at a sunflower, the whole world starts to smile. Without me there would be no fun.'

Orange started next to blow his own trumpet: 'I am the colour of health and strength. I may be scarce but I am precious for I serve the inner needs of human life. I carry all the most important vitamins. Think of carrots and pumpkins, oranges, mangoes, and paw-paws. I don't hang around all the time, but when I fill the sky at sunrise or sunset, my beauty is so striking that no one gives another thought to any of you'.

Red could stand it no longer. He shouted out: 'I'm the ruler of you all, blood, life's blood. I am the colour of danger and of bravery. I am willing to fight for a cause. I bring fire in the blood. Without me the earth would be as empty as the moon. I am the colour of passion and of love, the red rose, poinsettia and poppy'.

Purple rose up to his full height. He was very tall and he spoke with great pomp: 'I am the colour of royalty and power. Kings, chiefs and bishops have always chosen me for I am a sign of authority and wisdom. People do not question me; they listen and obey'.

Indigo spoke much more quietly than all the others, but just as determinedly: 'Think of me. I am the colour of silence. You hardly notice me, but without me, you all become superficial. I represent thought and reflection, twilight and deep waters. You need me for balance and contrast, for prayer and for inner peace'.

And so all the colours went on boasting, each convinced that they were the best. Their quarrelling became louder and louder. Suddenly, there was a startling flash of brilliant white lightning; thunder rolled and boomed. Rain started to pour down relentlessly. The colours all crouched down in fear, drawing close to one another for comfort.

Then rain spoke: 'You foolish colours, fighting among yourselves, each trying to dominate the rest. Do you not know that God made you all each for a special purpose, unique and different. He loves you all and wants you all. Join hands with one another and come with me. We will stretch you across the sky in a great bow of colour, as a reminder that He loves you all, that you can live together in peace, a promise that He is with you and a sign of hope for tomorrow'.

And so whenever God has used a good rain to wash the world, He put the rainbow in the sky, and when we see it we should remember that He wants us all to appreciate each other.

An Indian legend

Make yourself an ark

“So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. Make a roof for it and finish the ark to within 18 inches of the top. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks. I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them.”

Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

Genesis 6:14-22

The biblical story begins in Genesis with two accounts of a loving, creative God forming the earth and bringing humanity into being. This story converges in Revelation with this same God reigning over a healing community that becomes the new and glorious home of all believers. In between this vast history, there are many complex twists and turns. When we read this flood story as part of the much bigger story culminating in Revelation, we notice that the elements of God's ultimate healing begin right here.

The story of Noah and the Flood is both a story about sinful humanity and about how God acts at that moment in time. Although the action appears to centre on the ark and the people's plight, the real dynamic lies within the heart of God. The events themselves are vehicles to reveal God's judgement and his saving actions in the world. In one sense, this story is more concerned with what happens *inside* of God! We learn that God feels grief and that God is concerned with how human violence, sin and evil can destroy his beloved creation. The Flood starts out as a story of judgment and retribution, but actually ends up being a story of love and mercy. The point of the story therefore, is not the judgement with which it begins but the extraordinary promise with which it ends.

In our Bible passage we notice that God gave Noah detailed instructions about the construction of the ark. He did not casually warn Noah that there was a flood coming and that perhaps he should think about building a small boat. The idea of the boat was God's design; providing the ark was an intrinsic part of God's plan in the sending of the flood and of the saving of his select creation. God does not have vague or random afterthoughts.

This wooden ark was to have three decks and several cabins. Obviously Noah and his family wouldn't need all this space for themselves. But before God explains to Noah the relevance of his design he describes the ark's wider purpose - "I will establish my covenant with you". This is often seen as prefiguring the promise by God to Noah of the covenant mentioned in Genesis 9:9-17. Here, however, God talks about *establishing* the covenant, and not *making* it. It may well be, therefore, that this is a reference to the older promise made to Eve in the Garden of Eden: that through her will, one day, come the Messiah. This promise of a coming Messiah comes in God's rebuke of Satan in Genesis 3:15. The promise is first a promise of destruction for the serpent, and only second the promise of salvation for Adam and Eve and the whole human race. The Messiah was to come, then, both to destroy Satan and to deliver humanity from his dominion, a theme which as we know continues throughout the New Testament. Now God confirms that the covenant will still be fulfilled as promised and that the line will continue through Noah's family. It is important to observe that

Noah was not taken out of the judgement; rather, he was to be saved *through* it. God provided Noah with a miraculous shelter from the wrath of his judgement upon the world.

We return to God's grief which stemmed from his sense of loss. God felt broken when his creation was broken; he is not portrayed as an impersonal judge, but a friend betrayed. Out of his deep grief for the world that he had made with his own hands comes the flood. The chaos that had become unified at the beginning of creation (Genesis 2:1-4) now returns to chaos once more. The destroying waters rise and the flood wreaks devastation. Only the tiny remnant of Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark will remain, God cannot bear to destroy *everything*. He wants to save *something*. What we observe here is the tension that humans perceive in the character of God, and the tensions that we struggle to live within ourselves, namely the tension between righteousness and justice versus love and mercy.

The story goes on to tell how the waters subside (Genesis 8:10-12). Chaos recedes. God re-creates. God blesses Noah and affirms that humankind is still in God's image, restoring that dominion over the rest of creation (Genesis 9:1-7). He gives back the responsibility of stewardship, the responsibility to care for the broken world. Then the narrative ends in Genesis 9:11 with God's heartfelt promise: "Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth". The depths of God's mercy are revealed and his faithfulness promised to future generations.

Of course we know that in the history of Israel, the people continued to disobey God, to destroy his creation and themselves. In the end, though, these events lead to the ultimate saviour – Christ Jesus, whose own blood will be poured out for the world.

It is hope in God that rises from these dark, early waters of faith towards the well spring of faith with his son's coming on earth.

Spiritual exercise

What does the ark symbolise for you about Christian faith?

Imagine you are Mrs Noah in this story. What emotions might you feel?

What does this story teach us about God's creation and its hope for survival?

In what ways are the faithfulness of God revealed here?

Prayer

*God of hope,
you flooded your earth with the waters of your grief.
You set Noah, his family and all the animals apart
in an ark of promise and salvation.
You destroyed what you had made
but the dove returned holding an olive-twig,
and your covenant remained.
Amen*

An unknown day and hour

As it was in Noah's day, so it will be when the Son of Man comes. For in those days before the Flood people were eating and drinking, taking wives, taking husbands right up to the day Noah went into the ark, and they suspected nothing till the Flood came and swept them away. This is what it will be like when the Son of Man comes. Then of two men in the fields, one is taken, one left; of two women grinding at the mill, one is taken, one left. So stay awake because you do not know the day when your master is coming. You may be quite sure of this, that if the house-holder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and would have not allowed anyone to break through the wall of his house. Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Matthew 24: 37-44

We are warned here that no-one knows exactly when the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ, will arrive except God. In Greek '*parousia*' meant "appearance and subsequent presence with" and in the ancient world it referred to official visits by royalty. It was then appropriated by Christians as a unique term for Jesus' glorious return at the end of history.

The passage reminds us of Noah who believed in Yahweh and built the Ark in faith, but even when the flood came many people were surprised, as they had not prepared themselves or centred their hearts on God. Watchfulness to the will of God is crucial, and we should not get so caught up in our daily lives that we fail to see and understand God's signs for his world.

If we are too busy to pray, then we are too busy. And we must make sure we are ready for the day when the Son of Man will come again. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God's kingdom may come, and that God's will be done. Through repeating these familiar words we can become immune to the power of what we are praying. Yet this longing for the coming of the Lord is an important aspect of our faith.

The Bible passage calls us to be watchful and alert to the will of God, nurturing our relationship with God, prepared for his coming. While Matthew is asking us to think about the 'end time', we also need to be watchful for God's action in our everyday lives. Just as in Noah's day, we can ignore warning signs and get on with our lives. We may feel self-sufficient and see no place for God in our lives – we're just too busy! But if we are alert to God, then we never need feel truly despairing, even if our world seems to be collapsing around us.

Someone once said "Remember yesterday, plan for tomorrow, but live for today." If we thought that today was our last day on earth we would live differently. We would manage our relationships carefully and we would put God at the centre of all that we do. We can "stay awake" by reflecting on how we live our lives and asking ourselves whether we live as Jesus would want us to do. As God loves us so completely it is only a matter of stopping in our busyness and taking a breath to know that God is there with us, and longs for us to respond to him.

Spiritual exercise

How can you be more watchful in your faith throughout daily life?

Imagine that you knew that the Return of Christ was to be tomorrow. Consider whether this would affect your faith and actions.

Reflect on the hope of Christ's return; how does this encourage you to sustain a faithful relationship with God?

Prayer

God of Noah and of me,

Keep me faithful in watching and waiting.

Give me hope and courage

to stand ready for your return,

no matter how long I have to wait in your love.

Amen