

Red Sky at Night

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 13, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Genesis 9:12-17](#) and [Matthew 16:1-3](#)

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Aside from stumbling across the Iranian blessing I quoted in our gathering reflection, “May your skies always be filled with clouds,” I’m not familiar with the associations that the myriad cultures around the globe have with blue skies and clouds. I know that in English-speaking cultures, there are strong tendencies to associate the sun with happiness and clouds with sadness.

It is even there in our hymns. “Melt the clouds of sin and sadness/drive the storms of doubt away.” “May no earth born cloud arise ... to hide you from my eyes.” Other hymns refer to doubt and disaster as “clouds.” I know England has a reputation for being gray and damp. I can’t help but wonder if that experienced influenced these associations of sun with happiness and clouds with sadness and, because the hymns of this congregation are in English, these associations live on in our hymns.

Daniel Cooperrider notes, “Our cultural and theological bias against clouds is particularly striking when compared with the place of clouds in the Bible, where clouds are nearly universally regarded in a positive light and praised as nothing less than the most natural and immediate signs of the presence, the promise, and the glory of God.”¹ Not all that surprising, if you ask me, given how arid is the region from which the Bible comes.

I find it peculiar that clouds are not mentioned in the flood narrative we read in Genesis until the passage we heard today. The story of the flood takes three-and-a-half chapters to tell. One might think that with all that exposition there would be mention of clouds. Rain is mentioned. God tells Noah that God will send the rains, that it will rain for 40 days and 40 nights. But there’s no mention of clouds – at least not until the flood is over, the waters have receded, and the animals have all left the ark.

Only when God makes a covenant with Noah and all of creation are clouds mentioned, and it seems to me that that mention is positive. Once “the ecological disaster of the global flood subsides, and life returns to the earth, God ... pledges never to flood and threaten the future of life on earth like that again, and as a sign of that promise God points our gaze to the clouds, and particularly to that always surprising and delightful cloud phenomenon of a rainbow in the sky.”²

The storyteller does not share with us Noah’s response this covenant. I’ve enjoyed filling in the blanks in my own imagination. When God says, “When I bring clouds over the earth ...,” I imagine Noah saying, “No, no, no, no, no. No more clouds. You promise never to flood us out again, and the sign of that promise is clouds? Are you kidding me?!”

¹ Daniel Cooperrider, *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2022), 155.

² *Ibid*, 155-156.

Of course, the sign of God's promise is not simply clouds. "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth," God says in verse 13. The word *bow* is the word for the weapon used for hunting and for war. God's covenant is not only an armistice; it is disarmament. "God turns the very instrument of destruction into a sign of peace. The sword into a ploughshare. The bullet into a butterfly."³

When I was a kid, my dad had a prism that lived on the middle sash of a window in the room we called his "study." When I was little, I loved to hold it in the sunlight coming in through the window and to try to get the refracted visible light, broken down into its constituent colors, to shine on the white bookshelves or to dance across the tan carpet. It felt daring to put my hand into the miniature beam of colorful light, as if I thought it might burn me or stain my skin.

We can reveal the spectrum that makes up white light with a prism or by spraying water in a fine mist from a hose on a sunny day, but I never found that as satisfying or spectacular as seeing a rainbow arching across the sky. We know scientifically that a rainbow appears "when there is enough moisture in the air to refract sunlight, but not enough to obscure it. Water droplets break up the white light ..., allowing us to see that which we usually aren't able to, turning the invisible briefly visible. It is as if for a moment the sky has both rain and sunshine in it at the same time, or as if the fire element and the water element are no longer at odds, but are playmates and at peace, like the lion lying down with a lamb. In this sense, the rainbow is the perfect sign of God's covenantal promise with creation."⁴

And when we see a real rainbow, one caused by the rain, it is always shaped like an upside-down U. It starts near the ground and arches up into the sky before coming back down toward the ground. God has hung the weapon in the sky in such a way that it points away from us. Unstrung and without any arrows, it isn't even pointed at us.

"The flood was, in a sense, God pointing the bow at the earth.... [And] the rainbow is God's armistice written in the sky, God cease-fire in the clouds. The rainbow is the creator making peace with creation, as imperfect or as unrealized as it – as we – might be. The rainbow is God accepting and loving us unconditionally, just as we are in all our colorful diversity."⁵

I do find it a little disturbing that the rainbow is not hung in the sky primarily for us, for creation. At least according to the story, the rainbow is not there to help us remember that God loves us unconditionally. The rainbow hangs in the sky primarily for *God* to notice, to *remind* God of God's commitment to be at peace with all the world. God says (in verses 14-15), "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, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh."

Sandy brought this up during Bible Study this past Monday and it's been bugging me since. Why does a faithful God need a reminder about the covenant God has made? Daniel Cooperrider has an interesting take on this. "The rainbow, which is most often observed

³ *Ibid*, 156.

⁴ *Ibid*, 156-157.

⁵ *Ibid*, 157.

naturally in the form of half circle, is also theologically a half-sign or a half-symbol. The rainbow is God's pledge not to destroy creation. In other words, God will take care of God's side of creation care. But that still leaves much for us and for the earth to do if we are to complete the circle. God guarantees that God will not destroy the world, but God cannot guarantee that the world will not destroy itself. The other side of the rainbow, the other side of the creation covenant, the other side of accepting and loving unconditionally the endlessly diverse things of nature just as they are and making a covenantal promise that will do absolutely whatever we can to make sure life will have a future ... that half of the rainbow is up to us."⁶

This week I've also wondered what it would be like to read this story in Nepal this week. "Satellite imagery suggests a glacier collapse high in the Himalayas was the primary cause of the deadly torrent of mud, water and ice that tore along the Bhotekoshi River....

"The ice-rock avalanche pushed boulders and other debris into the Lhende Khola River, a tributary of the Bhotekoshi River. Water levels in rivers downstream rose by between 7 and 9 metres [between 23 and 30 feet] within 30 minutes, according to the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, an intergovernmental scientific institution. Scientists are still examining the precise mechanics of the Himalayan disaster, but many observe that glaciers and permafrost around the world are being weakened by global heating..."⁷

This area high in the Himalayan Mountains is warming twice as fast as the global average,⁸ and that warming is being caused by increases in heat-trapping pollution released when fossil fuels are burned. Bill McKibben points out that there are "perhaps 50,000 [glaciers] across the Himalayas and Hindu Kush. My point," he writes, "is: there is infinitely more damage to be done, or to put it another way there is infinitely more damage we might still be able to forestall."⁹

We in the West and especially in the United States are to blame. Bill does the math for us: "on average, Nepalis produce about four-tenths of a ton of carbon emissions annually, compared with about 14 tons for an American.... They are not causing the crisis that is killing them: we are."¹⁰

Bill's right, and we keep doing it. Our energy policies are homicidal. The Trump administration keeps pushing fossil fuels – announcing dramatically increased oil production in Venezuela on the same day as the flooding; pushing "reinvestment" in LNG facilities in Louisiana by companies that wanted to put their money into wind farms – and

⁶ *Ibid*, 157-158.

⁷ Jonathan Watts, "Climate crisis could be destabilising mountain areas like Nepal, experts warn," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/aug/27/climate-crisis-mountain-areas-glaciers-nepal-tibet> (posted 27 August 2026; accessed 30 August 2026).

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Bill McKibben, "The growing rumble," *The Crucial Years*, <https://billmckibben.substack.com/p/the-growing-rumble> (posted and accessed 30 August 2026).

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

people are dying as a result. (Current confirmed death tolls in the Himalayas are over a thousand.¹¹ It will likely rise to three or even four thousand.)

Insurance companies in the United States would probably call the flooding an act of God, but we know better. This wasn't an act of God, the God who promises not to destroy the earth with flood. This was the byproduct of a warming world, and the warming world is a direct result of our insistence on burning fossil fuels.

"Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning." My mother was fond of saying this when there was an exceptionally pretty sunset. We heard Jesus cite this ancient bit of meteorological wisdom in our gospel reading today. "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." I find myself wondering if enough of us will interpret the signs of our times to insist that we change our homicidal policies.

I pray it is so. Amen.

¹¹ Anne Bourke, "Nepal floods death toll climbs to 1,252 as rescue efforts continue," *ABC News*, <https://abcnews.com/International/nepal-floods-death-toll-climbs-1252-rescue-efforts/story?id=136167244> (posted 3 September 2026; accessed 12 September 2026).