

“FINISHING THE RAINBOW”

Genesis 6:9-22; 9:8-17

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As these things often do, it began as a simple project. The nursery complex at Pilgrim Congregational church was three rooms in the basement—a crib room, a play room, a classroom. In 1982, they had last been painted in 1963 when Bill Hafaker was Senior Minister. Now Bill was a hands-on minister; during his tenure, he supervised the painting of the entire building. But there was a small problem; Bill was completely color-blind. Hence every room in the building, except for the sanctuary, thank God, was painted either mustard yellow or a strange pea green, paints Bill had gotten on sale at the paint store.

So the rooms that housed our youngest children were not only in the basement with little natural light, but two of them were old mustard in hue, the last a muddy pea green. The floor, of course, was bare concrete. Not the most welcoming of environments. But I, the new young minister, was determined to change that. I begged the Trustees to have the nursery complex painted. They balked at the expense. I promised I would get volunteers to paint. And so we began.

Bright white paint was purchased. One Sunday after church, a group of about 10 parents met to paint. As we were washing the walls, and washing the walls, and washing the walls—20 years of grime did not give up their hold without a battle—the parents started looking around, really looking around, and the wheels of this small project came off. The volunteers sorting toys thought most of the toys were so tired they should be thrown out and new ones purchased. Another group decided it would be much more logical if all three nursery rooms had connecting interior doors. And with the crawlers and toddlers, carpet would be nice. No painting happened that day, not one brushstroke. Instead, the Associate Minister was sent back to the trustees with a whole laundry list of requests—construction work, cribs, tables, chairs, toys, carpet. I was terrified. You all know how scary Trustees can be.

But they capitulated, and with fairly good grace, and though it took several weeks, the nursery started looking, well, better. But the stark white walls were empty, blank, an improvement on pea green but not really inviting. What next? We had an artist in the congregation, a woman who worked mostly in water colors. She volunteered to do “something” to the nursery walls. And something she did. For ten days, she literally moved into the church basement—slept there, ate there, worked there, creating a mural that moved from wall to wall and room to room, even around the support pillars in the middle of the rooms, telling the story of Noah’s Ark. It was fabulous really: Noah and his family, the building of the ark, and lots of animals from elephants and tigers to dogs and rabbits and mice to several varieties of birds and fish, and, of course, because we lived in Minnesota, mosquitos. The story ended on a central column in the playroom with a rainbow that snaked around two sides.

We, the adults, we thought our project was finally done, and none too soon as our one day project had now lasted all summer. But then the church school year began, and the children were welcomed into their beautiful new rooms. Two weeks later, I was invited to visit the 3-4 year olds in their new classroom because they had a request. Their spokesman, a precocious 4 year

old named Geoffrey, informed me that the children had been thinking and they were not satisfied with the room. Rainbows, I was informed, do not snake around columns; they go in a straight arc, and anyway, we had forgotten part of the story, the tent. "The tent?" I asked. "God put the rainbow in the sky as a tent," Geoffrey told me, "to hold us all underneath it, and to remind us that God will never hurt us." Geoffrey pointed accusingly at the column, "There's no tent." I frantically tried to remember a tent in the Noah story, and finally the teacher helped me out, mouthing the word "covenant." Ah, covenant, tent, 4 year olds.

My first thought was to set the child straight. A covenant is not a tent, but then again, as I thought about it, if you're 4 years old, you know what a tent is; and you know that the tent is there to protect you. Maybe that's better than an intangible word like "covenant." And so, I put out one final call to my blessed volunteers. In the following two weeks, first a handy dad came in and built a small extension to the column where the rainbow was displayed, then in came the volunteer painters again, and finally the artist. The rainbow was repainted the right way, out and down one face of the newly extended space, and up above it in the sky, lightly painted, hardly more visible than a fog, was the suggestion of a large tent; and under the rainbow, under God's tent, now in the mural, children played: happy, loved, valued, safe. The rainbow was finally finished. So thanks be to God today for rainbows, for our children, for church school volunteers. Amen.