A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach  
at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
on February 18, 2018

*Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15*

There’s a wonderful children’s story by Margaret Wise Brown entitled, *The Runaway Bunny*. When you allow yourself to feel the mother’s love in this story, it’s hard to not get a little choked up. Perhaps the telling of this story is particularly poignant given the tragedy at Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on Valentine’s Day. I’ll tell just a bit of the story.

“One there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, ‘I am running away.’ ‘If you run away,’ said his mother, ‘I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.’ ‘If you run after me,’ said the little bunny, ‘I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.’ ‘If you become a fish in a trout stream,’ said his mother, ‘I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.’ ‘If you become a fisherman,’ said the little bunny, ‘I will become a rock on the mountain, high above you.’ ‘If you become a rock on the mountain high above me,’ said his mother, ‘I will become a mountain climber, and I will climb to where you are.’ ‘If you become a mountain climber,’ said the little bunny, ‘I will be a crocus in a hidden garden.’ ‘If you become a crocus in a hidden garden,’ said his mother, ‘I will be a gardener. And I will find you.’” The story goes on: I will find you, I will find you, I will find you. It is the story of God’s love, God’s ever-present, everlasting love. Gracious God, let this news sink into our souls: we are loved.

God’s everlasting love is the message in the passage from Genesis this morning. “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 clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. The waters shall never again become a flood.’” Never again. The covenant is God’s everlasting relationship with us.
God tells Abraham (Genesis 17:7): “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” God tells Isaac (Genesis 26:3-4): “I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring.” God tells Jacob (Genesis 28:14): “Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.” Is it sinking in? Are we assimilating the message? The covenant is God’s everlasting relationship with us.

When words aren’t quite enough, the message is made real in Jesus living among us, in Jesus returning to us after the resurrection...God’s love is ever-present, everlasting. Gracious God, let this news sink into our souls: we are loved. The rainbow is a perfect reminder of God’s love in the everyday of life. The color red signifies both danger and passion. Orange signifies both creativity and deceit. Yellow signifies both jealousy and joy. Green signifies both health and greed. Blue signifies trust. Indigo signifies spirituality. Violet signifies both sorrow and power. When you look at a rainbow, not all seven colors are distinguishable, are they? But, they are all always there. The colors represent the breadth of life. God is loving us through it all.

Though I learned about the shootings at Douglas High School from a friend on Wednesday evening, it was another 36 hours before I could bring myself to look at the news coverage – here we are once again – it’s just so painful. But, finally, I did look. I learned about the 14 youth who died, four of whom were seniors and college-bound, one of whom became a U.S. citizen in January. I learned about the three adults who died, the Athletic Director, the Assistant Football coach who was fatally injured jumping in front of the shooter to protect students, the Teacher who
unlocked the door of his classroom to let in and protect students and then was shot and killed when closing the door. It is not simplistic to talk about God’s love in the face of tragedy. God’s love will transform this world.

How do we live in God’s love? How do we assimilate God’s love? How do we move from an intellectual understanding to a felt experience of God’s love which inspires our every belief and decision and action? It’s all too easy to let our independent nature take over. I set my course. Then, once in a while we have a life-changing experience that draw us up short or stops us in our tracks. I’ve shared with you before my having lunch with a friend shortly after I received my cancer diagnosis. I remember this almost overwhelming sense of gratitude just for being able to sit and enjoy a conversation with a good friend over lunch. I’m sure you’ve had those moments of gratitude. And, I remember wanting to always remember that gratitude, to be always aware of God’s love which is being offered to us, through one another, all the time. But, we get busy. We turn our attention elsewhere. We forget. Yet, we can keep trying. Practice makes perfect. Assimilating God’s love shapes how we approach life, how we perceive life, how we live life.

Certainly hate, but even negativity, rancor, and pettiness consume energy...burn it up...bring us down. Love creates new energy...it lifts us up...it transforms life. In God’s love, we are given the courage to persist in effecting change when change doesn’t happen fast enough. In God’s love we are given the courage to care for those in pain, to draw near to the survivors, to their heartache, and to love them. Love heals. Let us pray. May the love of God this day enable us; the nakedness of God dis-arm us; the beauty of God silence us; the justice of God give us voice; the integrity of God hold us; the desire of God move us; the fear of God expose us to the truth; and the breath of God awaken in us abundant life. Amen.