

The readings today talk about conflict. There's the great flood. Great floods are things too big to hide from: social upheaval, collapses of government or economic systems, natural catastrophes. We have to rely on God. Then there's the spiritual struggle between obeying God or disobeying. And there's the conflict each person has ... even Jesus ... with his, with her, own temptations.

This is the short list, of course. There are conflicts with neighbors, with family, with the IRS. Conflicts we take to court, street conflict between gangs, or between gangs and citizens who don't want their town taken over. There are armed conflicts between nations ... and of course we have conflicts sometimes with ourselves.

The universal symbol of conflict is a sword. Or, if you're from the ancient Middle East, the symbol for conflict, violent conflict, conflict to the death ... is the bow.

Here it is (bow). Bows go back maybe 12,000 years. Greeks used them, Parthians, Persians, Native Americans ... but especially the ancient Middle East. The Babylonian God Marduk didn't carry a big stick; he had a horrible cosmic invincible bow.

This bow is relaxed. It's no danger. But it can be strung. ... Now it's dangerous. It's carrying around mechanical energy. With an arrow and an open target ... it's lethal.

Sometimes people can be like this. Strung, taut, ready to let fly. Please walk around them, because if they're not good at containing their bile, darts and arrows come flying from their mouths and eyes and hands.

Is God dangerous like this? The bible mentions God's terrible wrath. But in our Genesis reading comes something else. God says: I will establish my covenant with you; I will not ever send the toxic flood to destroy all mortal beings. And as a sign, I am taking my bow ... and ... hanging it up. It's still taut. It's still dangerous. But every time you see a rainbow in the sky, not pointed at you but hung up safely ... you're to remember: I'll get mad but not destroy. I've hung up my bow, given my word, made you a covenant!

And now ... to us. We have bows too, we can be dangerous. But people in a covenant with God ... hang up their bows. We get mad, we take actions, but we don't kill. Don't. We don't even, the Popes say we shouldn't, finally get so fed up with criminals we resort to capital punishment. We are so hesitant we almost never go to war as a solution.

Why? Because God, with every right, has hung up the bow. When Satan was tempting Jesus in the desert, driving him nearly nuts He never zinged. And when our race gathered, gathers, around Jesus like a bunch of rabid dogs to kill him ... he doesn't zing.

The next time my temperature rises, and angry aggressive feelings make me dangerous to others, I hope I remember to look up to heaven and hear God's voice: "This is the sign I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow ... in the clouds.