

February 21, 2021 (Focus: Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15; First Sunday in Lent)

Today we encounter two stories with similar threads. In Genesis the story is told of the great flood, then appears a rainbow, a sign of God's saving grace and covenant. In Mark's gospel, we hear of Jesus in the wilderness, then a call to help bring God's saving grace to others...flood, then good news...wilderness, then we are called to be part of the good news

We have seen these themes played out in our nation this week. First, snow and cold "flooded" the south, then the saving grace of seasonal temperatures returning...wilderness with no power and water, caused in part by human failing, evil in the choice of money and power self-serving while keeping others down. Evil in the wilderness, with some listening to the devil in their thoughts disguised as self-interest, as often is, let those called to serve freeze and thirst and starve while I take a vacation.

Wilderness with no power and water, but now charging exorbitant rates for those with power because of a pricing model most people don't understand but which was allowed to have a mechanism where the market was made a god and mattered more than people. Wilderness with no power and water, yet some answered the call to be part of the raising up of God's kingdom by starting and staffing phone banks to identify those in most need and also raising funds to help those in need.

We saw this week the wilderness played out with vaccines used as weapons by a governor in a different southern state, withdrawing vaccines to punish those who dare to criticize his unfair distribution process, and instead helping only those who praise him.

We saw the wilderness played out this week in the callousness of people not willing to walk a mile in another's shoes, like the school board in a CA town that all got fired after they openly mocked and judged parents as selfish for wanting their children back in school.

We see the wilderness in people paying lip service to Black History Month but also calling Black Lives Matter a terrorist movement, denying the toll of deaths of people of color at the hands of police in too many cities over too many years. We see the wilderness played out by people who quoted Martin Luther King on his birthday but now work fervently and sometimes furtively to limit voting by people of color.

We live in the wilderness of poverty, sexism, racism, etc., you know the score, this wilderness continuing because those in power want to stay in power, not share power or worse yet to them have someone who does not look like them have any power. When you've kept others in the wilderness, you don't want them to know there is an alternative. You don't want them to know that there can be a kingdom of God here on earth as in heaven

Flood seen as God's punishment, and there were people who tried to blame the wilderness of power and water outages on various things they claimed God was upset with, including liberal politics, so-called false narrative of climate change, and even gay marriage. But there are some who see the flood narrative in Genesis not as God punishing humanity but as God's pain over being rejected by humanity. God's creation, God's companions turned from God, acted as if they didn't need God or God's ways, and this caused God pain, the metaphorical tears of the divine flooding the earth. Forty days of outpouring of grief.

What then causes God to turn back from grief and despair? As the theologian Walter Bruggemann posits, God remembered.

It is put this way: God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark (8:1). God remembered Noah. God remembered. (Cf. Ps. 105:5; Luke 1:54–55).

God remembered that God loved all that had been created, and called it good. God remembered. This God is not timeless and immune to the flow of human events. God cares about all creation, including humanity that sometimes, too often, turns from God. And so in spite of all that humanity had done and would no doubt still do, God offers a covenant, a binding relationship with humanity.

And who does God choose to work with in terms of this new covenant: Noah, the one who helps lead humanity back to God, who leads repentance toward God. And then God offers covenant, not really asking humanity what it wants at this point, but knowing that covenant would bless humanity. And humanity, turning back to God and seeing itself in covenant, would bless all that God created, would be more attune to creation.

Rainbow: symbol, but also sign. Rainbow comes out even before the rain is entirely gone. There is still work to be done, clean up from the storm, but there is a sign, a reminder that we are God's and God is ours (and not just ours, but for all humanity and for all creation's) and calls us to remember. A reminder that comes again in the form of Jesus, who knows the wilderness as we know it, who knows temptation and suffering as we know them, and who shows us that temptation and suffering can be overcome, and the kingdom of God can come here on earth.

And maybe that is enough for today. For us to remember. No matter how overwhelmed we feel by the flood of expectations or noise, no matter how stark the wilderness we feel we are living in today and we anticipate for the near future. We have not been abandoned, and so we should not abandon one another, or creation, or the Creator. We need to remember that the covenant that binds us to God also binds us to others and all creation. Maybe, just maybe it is that when we turn from God, the worst isn't just that we have removed something key to our lives, but that we have also pained God. When we turn from God and God's ways, it is like God has lost something dear, a bit of God's heart. And when we turn back to God, we return what was lost. God's heart mends. Maybe. What we know for sure is that when we help others, we are blessed, and God is blessed. When we share in the building up of God's peaceable kingdom, we are blessed and God is blessed.

Without the sign of a rainbow at the end of a storm, without the sign of the God's spirit blessing Jesus, we might forget that we have a companion who weathers these moments with us. Without the signs, we might view those challenges that sharpen us as obstacles sent to destroy us. Without the sign, we might believe that acts of nature or our own collective doing are God's vengeance and punishment inflicted upon us. So let us remember the signs-rainbow and dove-and be blessed.

As in days of old, Creator God, we come to look for your signs of covenant promises. Like the rainbow days of Noah, we see and know your signs and hear your voice again directing us to places of preparation and transformation in our lives and in our world. Thank you God, for your covenant signs in this season of Lent. Amen.

Gracious and loving God, we bring to this time our whole selves. We bring our joys and concerns, we bring our doubts and desires, we bring our deepest sense of hope to this time. We are grateful for this encounter of the holy, for this sense that we breathe in your spirit, we become one with your spirit, and our spirits are refreshed and renewed. Awaken our soul's eye to seek such glimpses of the holy in our daily lives; we suspect you are with us, as your steadfast love endures forever, so can endure and make new even such a time as this.

We need your Spirit moving in and among us, for many of us are discouraged by events in the world. Many of us are worried by the snow and cold further limiting our movements and activities. Pour down your spirit especially on those who struggle in discerning truth and the right way to live and the right decisions to make. May we all learn that it is never too late to apologize and make amends. May we all learn that it is never too late to do the right thing.

Ever Gracious God, pour out your love and your healing powers upon us, and upon all those in need of healing in body, mind, and spirit. Grant all in need an experience of your renewing compassion and care, especially...

Bless all those who have lost loved ones to this virus plaguing us now. Bless all affected with compassion and a sense of hope, that soon our efforts will turn the corner on this pandemic.

Moment of silent meditation...

Gracious God, grant us peace in our minds and in our hearts, as we struggle with being citizens of the world and as we seek to be accountable to each other and all creation. We trust that you intend peace for us, for we have heard it in the words of our teacher and spiritual guide and savior, the one we call the Prince of Peace, who taught us to pray to you, saying, Our Father...