

18 February 2018

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." 12 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: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 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. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." 17 God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth." (Gen. 9:8-17 NRSV)

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. 14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mk. 1:9-15 NRSV)

1

The season of Lent began Wednesday. Some of you made your way to our fellowship hall Wednesday evening for a worship service in which Deb (our Parish Associate) led us into an ancient custom involving the imposition of ashes...the marking of ourselves with the sign of the cross.<sup>1</sup>

Today, as we gather on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in the season of Lent, we symbolically stop what we have been doing, adjust our sights, and take a step toward Easter. Today and for the next six weeks we will be preparing ourselves for those events that take up most of what fills the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - i.e., Jesus' last week, his crucifixion, his resurrection. My New Testament professors in seminary used to say the four Gospels were basically the story of Jesus' death and resurrection with an extended introduction. During Lent, then, we will take aim again at the heart of the Gospel.

To get Lent started off with a jolt, there was another terrible mass murder...this one on a high school campus in Parkland, FL. You've heard the news. Seventeen people were killed on Ash Wednesday. That number does not take into consideration the many, many, many other people whose lives were forever altered, marked, scared by what took place that day. That number does not take into consideration the people whose lives were forever altered by similar events that have taken place every week this year on some school campus. That number does not take into consideration the people whose lives will be forever altered by this same sort of violence that will take place again.

I know you join me in being troubled over each person's death...troubled by someone for whom life is held so cheap...troubled by a political environment that insists certain options are off the table. I know you join me in not knowing exactly how to express your sorrow, your frustration, and your anger. With the prophets of Israel, we lament as one voice saying, "How long, O Lord? How long?"

No one seems to know how to address this phenomena that has become all too common. I confess that if it were my son or daughter, brother or sister who was murdered, I would be a man possessed. My confession is that I should be a man possessed nonetheless...because in a sense those who were murdered were and are your and my sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

As legitimately troubled as we are...I believe we can all affirm that God can make good come from even the grimmest of circumstances...that God can bring peace out of warfare...that God can turn rough places into level ground. I truly believe God can teach us, show us, how to bring peace where there is no peace. I believe that God can grant us as a people the sort of imagination and courage to change what is into what can be.

I also believe (and this gets to the biblical passages we read earlier)...that God loves all of us **without condition**. Some people see this as an irritating truth. I say irritating because it is much more comfortable to despise someone like the young man who murdered those people in Parkland...much more comfortable. But I am convinced God's unconditional love goes to the heart of our faith. God loves us no matter what we think or do or say.

From the relatively safe distance of a theoretical point of view, you may be scratching your head wondering why anyone would be irritated by this truth. But when we are close up and personal with murderous evil, God's **unconditional** love is so irksome to almost all of us because we prefer a **conditional** God...a God who operates by our "eye-for-and-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth" notion of justice. Deep down we believe God awards people for good behavior...and punishes people for bad behavior. We believe God's love and approval is not a gift but something to be earned. We seem to take issue with Paul's suggestion that "Nothing shall separate us from the love of God"...and would prefer to believe people's thoughts and behavior **can** in fact separate them from God's love.

My guess is that not everyone would agree with my appraisal. We would say, "God wants each of us to choose to love him." And I could not agree more. God certainly wants us to choose to love and serve him. But I would say God cares about our motives,

our reason, for choosing to love and serve him. **I believe God wants us to choose to love him as a way of saying "thank you"...not as a way to persuade God to love us.** These two very different motives are as far apart as the east is from the west.

Here is what I mean. To the question, "Why love God?" we may answer one of two ways: First, we may choose to love God because it pays dividends...i.e., it gets us something we don't already have but want.<sup>2</sup> This answer involves persuading God to be loving. A typical prayer coming out of this understanding says, "Give me."

The second answer involves choosing to love God because we are grateful for something God has already done, something God has already given us. This answer acknowledges that God does not need to be persuaded to love us...God has proven his love over and over and over again. A typical prayer coming out of this understanding says, "Thank you."

4

With this distinction in mind, I want us to consider the two biblical passages we read this morning....one that has us ponder the rainbow and the other that points to the cross.

How surprising that the authors of the Common Lectionary would have us begin the season of Lent with the story of Noah and the flood...and then draw to a close six weeks later with Jesus nailed to a cross. Wonder what we are supposed to learn about God and ourselves from this curious juxtaposition?

Let's first consider the story of the rainbow. The rainbow promise in Genesis comes as the conclusion to the story of Noah and the flood. This pre-historic story tells of God's first attempt to rid the human race of evil.

Once upon a time a massive flood was sent to cleanse the earth of human wickedness. A man named Noah and his family were spared – along with two of every kind of creature on the earth. This hand-full of people were spared because through them, God was going to start over. God was going to repopulate the earth with people who would function the way they were meant to function – that is, with people who would always be mindful of God.

But the flood appears to have failed to achieve the desired effect. No amount of water was able to cleanse the human race of its sinfulness.<sup>3</sup>

The surprise built into the rainbow story is that it was not the human race that waved the white flag and said "I promise never to do this again" – it was God!<sup>4</sup> The rainbow was a sign of *God's* unilateral, unconditional solemn promise.

Do you realize the magnitude of what the writers of the ancient Hebrew tradition were trying to tell us about God? The prophet Isaiah put it this way...

*I blot out your transgressions for my own sake...I choose to remember your sins no more.*<sup>5</sup>

God knew we humans would not change much. If we were to have a relationship with God, then God would have to make it happen. Here is the God of the universe acting unilaterally – not to squash us, but to save us.

"I will never again destroy every living creature," says God. "In fact, I am going to give myself a reminder of this promise. I am going to hang up my bow in the sky, but this bow will be empty of arrows. I will never use it again to visit terror upon you."<sup>6</sup>

This is not a conditional promise, is it? It is an *unconditional* one – “Never again.”<sup>7</sup> Mind you, the story does not say there will never again be floods...or that people will never again be killed by floods. The promise is that God will not act to destroy every living thing.

When you and I see a rainbow in the sky, then, it is not just there to remind God of his promise. It is there to remind us of God’s unjustified goodness and unconditional love. Next time you see a rainbow think “gratitude.”

5

Now let’s take a moment to consider the cross. You might say the passage from Mark’s Gospel account did not mention the cross – and you’d be right. But in every way it prefigured the cross. Consider this...

Every detail of the brief Marcan text spells trouble. We read that Jesus was baptized. Baptism may seem harmless enough – particularly when I drip a few drops of water on a baby’s head and walk him or her around the sanctuary. But baptism represents death by drowning. Baptism signifies death before it signifies new life. According to Paul, what is baptism for us if not a baptism into Jesus’ death.<sup>8</sup>

We read that immediately following his baptism, the Holy Spirit **drove** Jesus into the wilderness where he experienced temptation and the threat of being torn to pieces by wild beasts. We read that John the Baptizer was arrested – and we know he would soon face a gruesome death. We read that after his wilderness ordeal, Jesus went to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God – the news that with his coming, the time was fulfilled, the kingdom of God had drawn near. The people were to repent. They were to turn from their God-forsaking ways toward God in order that they may believe the good news. You and I know that, as odd as it sounds, Jesus’ good news would not be complete until he hung on a cross. We know that everything about Jesus’ life was also about his death.

What is surprising about the story Mark will tell us is that it is not so different from the story of the rainbow. The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is a story about God acting unilaterally, unconditionally. It is a story about God declaring that the evil that caused Jesus’ death does not have the last word. In fact, evil and hatred and violence are no match for God’s grace. Jesus’ story is the announcement that life cannot ultimately be defeated by death...that there is no road that is at last swallowed up in an ultimate darkness...not even the sort of darkness that fell over the people of Parkland, FL, on Ash Wednesday.<sup>9</sup> God intends new life...and so God will make it happen.

6

We begin the season of Lent with three stories – one about a rainbow, one about a cross, and one about a horrific mass murder in Florida. My friends, these are our stories. These are the stories that tell us who we really are...because they tell us we belong to God who cares for us even though God should not. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

O God, we do not seem to be able to avoid messing up...and you give us no reason to think we will not mess up again, with tragic consequences – blistering, parching consequences – consequences which, if we do it to ourselves, we must bear. For you never said you would ever uncouple the human deed and its historic consequence.

4

You are too just and too sure for that. But the scriptures also assure us it is your promise that you will never again destroy the earth. You have promised that the sun will shine and the rain will fall and the bees will pollinate and the worms will aerate and the marsh grasses will shelter the eggs of the fish and all the wonderful, providential, life-sustaining orders of the world will go on and on – because you want them to. O God, thank you for your promises. They give us the framework in which to make peace. They make real the possibility of peace, and the reality of peace they make exquisitely worthwhile.<sup>10</sup> Amen.



Lexington Presbyterian Church  
120 South Main Street  
Lexington, Virginia 24450  
[www.lexpres.org](http://www.lexpres.org)

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> While this is the 15<sup>th</sup> year we have held this service...for some Presbyterians Ash Wednesday is a fairly new experience. As a boy I attended Maundy Thursday services at church. In fact, in the church I grew up in the young people were Confirmed on Maundy Thursday. But we did not have Ash Wednesday services. That was something Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians did...not Presbyterians! It was very Presbyterian to view every Sunday as a re-enactment of Easter, the Lord's Day. It is hard to argue with that logic. Each Lord's Day is special. Each Sunday we gather for worship because Jesus was raised from the dead. What we in our day are finding, though, is how the cadence of a liturgical year can be very useful. Happily there are more and more Presbyterians and other Protestants who are realizing the beauty of the season of Lent...its capacity to offer a teachable opportunity...its open doorway into a richer approach to Easter.

<sup>2</sup> One of the *Naylor Sonnets* says, "Shall (we) be good because of some reward - because the virtuous act pays dividends?" From - Thurman, Howard. 1981 ed. *Meditations of the Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 104. James Naylor's (1616-1660) was an English Quaker. The sonnet referred to here is entitled "That Delights to Do No Evil." *There Is A Spirit: The Naylor Sonnets* is a collection, first published in 1945, of 26 poems by Kenneth Boulding, each inspired by a four- to sixteen-word portion of Naylor's dying words.

<sup>3</sup> Funk, Erika. 2006. From her unpublished work for *Lectio Jubilare* based on the text for today, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Funk, 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 43:25.

<sup>6</sup> Copenhaver, Martin B. 2006. "Starting over," in *Christian Century*, February 21 issue. Chicago: Christian Century Foundation, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, Celia B. 1999. *Genesis. Interpretation Bible Studies*. Louisville: Geneva Press, 34.

<sup>8</sup> See Romans 6:3-4, Colossians 2:12.

<sup>9</sup> Thurman, 109.

<sup>10</sup> Towner, W. Sibley. 2018. *Prayers that Sing and Stir the Heart*. Richmond, VA: Union Presbyterian Seminary, 15.