

Lent 1 Year B 2009

Texts: Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you”
Genesis 9:8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

The story of Noah is probably one of the best-known stories of the Old Testament. Countless nurseries in churches and temples around the world have pictures of the ark and animals gracing their walls. St. Matthew’s is no exception. Our nursery walls have some of the happiest looking giraffes, tigers and elephants you ever did see. And until a few months ago Mr. and Mrs. Noah were smiling down from those walls as if all was right with the world, which of course, it wasn’t because had everything been right with the world they wouldn’t have found themselves and all the animals on the ark to begin with.

As with most bible stories that we believe we know so well, when we really look at what is going on in the text we come to realize that we perhaps don’t know quite so much as we had thought. As with most Bible stories that we could recite in our sleep, when we really examine them, we find that human nature being what it is, we have put the focus in the wrong place, concentrated on the wrong parts, or put the humans in the starring role.

That is because as humans we really, really, really want it to be all about us. We want to be the main attraction. We want all the honor and glory that we can squeeze from life. And so it is that when faced with a story of this magnitude and grandeur, we have named it “Noah and the Ark”, when perhaps a more appropriate title would be “God’s gracious nature and committed compassion,” or “God’s new heaven and new earth.”

Our trying to shift the focus onto ourselves versus God is a sign of our sin and self-centeredness. It is as if we are bit players in a movie,

perhaps even walk-ons, or at most playing a supporting role and coming to believe that at Oscar time we deserve the award for best actor.

But our Old Testament reading today isn't about Noah and the animals, it isn't even really about the destruction of the world as the people back in the Ancient Near East knew it, it is a story about God's grief and love for his creation. It is a story of the lengths God is willing to go to give us, his beloved, a new hope and a new beginning.

This story is believed to have been written during the time of the Exile, a time when Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and Babylonians and forcibly resettled. Everything they had known was gone. Nothing remained for them. It was a time of religious and political chaos and confusion.

It was as if everything they knew and loved was wiped off the face of the earth. Major questions of this time were "where is our God?" "Why have we been abandoned?" "Has our God been beaten by the gods of our oppressors?"

It is in this swirling vortex of chaos and fear that those in exile would meet up with their God again. It was through the destruction of their old world that God shows them that a new world is possible. Think about that for a moment. Putting ourselves in their position, think about losing everything, our government, our economic and religious structures, our cultural familiarity and then hearing a story of God who tells his people, "never, never, never again will this happen. I promise you and myself that with all that I have, you are my people and I am your God."

The exiles had to die to who they were, who they had been, in order to claim God's promise of new life for themselves. This isn't a story so much of death, destruction and suffering as it is a story of hope and salvation, of new life and new beginnings.

This isn't a story about Noah and the animals; it is a story about a great and gracious God.

There are some very interesting and very important aspects to this story that we need to look at in order to understand the depth and breath of what God has done.

“God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendents after you, and with every living creature that is with you.”

“I am establishing my covenant with you.” A covenant is a promise, a solemn and binding agreement. This is a promise initiated by God. Noah doesn’t ask for it, it is simply given to him and to all his descendents; in fact, it is given to all future generations. That means that this covenant is still in effect. We are the recipients of this promise made so very long ago. This covenant holds as true and fast for us as it did for Noah. God did not put a statute of limitations on it. It is as valid now as it was when God first put it into effect.

This covenant, which is mentioned seven times in 8 verses, is universal. It doesn’t just cover Noah and his family it covers “every living creature.” Everything and everyone that God has made, all of creation, is included. It is not exclusive but inclusive in its breath and depth.

It is also unconditional. God puts no if/then clauses in this covenant. There are no quid pro quo statements limiting what humanity can do. The limits in the covenant are limits that God puts on God’s own power. The covenant covers what God will not do, not what we shouldn’t, couldn’t or won’t do. Perhaps that is because God knows that no matter what we say, no matter what we promise, we just can’t help but screw things up.

What has changed in this covenant is not anything about us, what has changed is God. God has decided that for all the trouble we cause, havoc we wreak, seeds of destruction we sow, that we are worth his undying and undeniable love and compassion. I find that to be nothing less than amazing and awe-inspiring.

“When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature.”

The rainbow, God's bow in the clouds, is not a reminder to us that God will never again destroy us; it is God's reminder to himself of what he has promised us. Israel's God, our God, is a God who remembers and who is faithful. We humans make promises and break them all the time. God makes promises and is forever faithful to them. We cannot count on ourselves, but we can fully rely and count on God to do what God has said will be done.

Lastly, a rainbow appears only after a storm. The light refracted through the water droplets creates a spectrum of beauty; they are literally rays of possibility and hope. They show us that through the storms and floods of life, through the struggle and suffering we experience, there is a much larger story being told, a much larger reality that is unfolding.

Last Wednesday was the first day of Lent. Ashes were put on our foreheads to remind us that we are but dust and to dust we shall return. Lent is a time when we are reminded that we are the created, not the Creator. It is a time when we are reminded that life isn't all about us, but all about a God who loves us enough to enter our world as one of us. It is a time when we remember that we are but supporting players on the cosmic stage.

This Lent we are living in especially chaotic and fearful times. We wonder if the current economic, governmental, religious and cultural structures we have will be sustained, or if they will collapse. We wonder if life as we have come to know it and expect it to be will forever be changed. We wonder where God is in a world that knows starvation, disease and death. We wonder where God is in a world that has experienced genocide across the globe and human slavery and oppression in numbers never experienced before in the history of the world. We wonder when it all will stop and when new life and new hope will enter our world.

The good news of God in Christ is that the story of Noah is our story. The good news is that God's promise of new life and new beginnings to Noah is the promise given to us. The good news is that new life and new hope have already entered into our world in the form of Jesus Christ.

Lent asks that we enter into the pain and suffering of the world, pain and suffering that we have caused so that we may come to understand the infinite power and love of God. Lent is a time when our attention and gaze is drawn from a bow in the sky, to a cross on a hill. It is a time that spans possibility and ends with a promise of eternal life. And that is very good news indeed.

Amen.