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Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

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***Genesis 9:8-17***

***8Then 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, 10and 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. 11I 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.”***

***12God 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: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.******14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I 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. 16When 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.”******17God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”***

***Mark 1:9-15***

***9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” 12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.***

***14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”***

This past week we celebrated a simple service for Ash Wednesday, the official beginning of the church season of Lent. We held a simple service that included scripture and song and the imposition of ashes. Those of you were here may remember the scripture we read was from the gospel of Luke. It was *that* gospel writer’s telling of Jesus’ time in the wilderness, just after his baptism. Unlike the version from Mark’s gospel that we read today, where there is not much embellishment of the events. Today’s reading is more like the Cliff Notes version: Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan and was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

It's expected that the first Sunday in Lent is one where we read a text about Jesus in the wilderness, but this Mark version gives us so little information. Why might that be? Perhaps, while this particular text does refer to Jesus’ time in the wilderness, maybe the focus for today is on another part of the same text.

I think one answer can be found by taking a look at the old testament lesson that is paired with the gospel lesson for today – God’s covenant with Noah.

God’s early relationship with humanity was not a smooth one. Relatively early in the time after creation, the bible tells us, God was not happy with humanity. So God resolved to destroy humanity and the earth with a great flood. The man Noah however, found favor with God so God decided that Noah would not be destroyed in the flood. When God first began to give Noah instructions about how to survive the coming destruction, God told Noah that God would establish a covenant with Noah. After the flood, God gave Noah instructions to go and multiply and bear fruit, and God established a covenant with Noah and all his descendants and with every living thing. This covenant with Noah is the first recorded covenant in the bible.

Many ancient Near Eastern world civilizations preserved a story of a major flood that enveloped the entire world. These recorded stories of turbulent waters are symbolic of the ultimate or even mystical chaos. “A vast and terrorizing flood was viewed as a return to the primordial chaos out of which the world had been created in the first place (see Gen. 1:2).”1

Harkening back to those great waters of chaos from which God brought everything into being, this covenant with Noah is further emphasis on the control God has over chaos. Whether it is the waters of chaos before creation or the waters of the great flood God sent intending to destroy humanity and the earth, God has the power. Waters of creation, and waters of destruction.

Recognizing the cosmic battle between good and evil, the forces of chaos vs. a youthful warrior god, the bow would be a symbol of that warrior. When God tells Noah that God’s bow will be hung in the sky, the image would have been of that warrior hanging up his bow at the end of a battle.

A covenant is not an agreement between equal parties. There is often a power differential involved between the two parties. In a covenant the relationship is put on a new legal level. In this covenant between God and Noah and all his descendants and all of creation, there are no additional requirements for Noah or creation. The covenant is “*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.”*

The limits that are set are only limits on God.2 It is God who wanted to destroy the earth and humanity because humans seemed bent on always returning to chaos. *God* has “set my bow in the sky and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” *14When 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. 16When 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.”*

*17God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”*

What does it mean if the rainbow we marvel at is something put there to remind *God* of this covenant? Because I’m human, and think kind of literally and linearly, I wonder to myself, what does God think about when there’s a rainbow. From my perspective down here on earth, I see a rainbow, and maybe I think, “Wow, that is so cool! If I think of God then, I kind of generalize my thoughts and think, this rainbow is such a beautiful reminder of how imaginative and creative and beautiful God is! Look at those colors, think of how the light travels at different speeds so each color comes to us separately but right next to the other color, and forms this rainbow.” I mean, I think I’m as impressed with God as I am with the science, assuming maybe that God made the science too, so I’m just down here saying “Wow!”

I don’t think of God as destructive, but rather as a life-giving God, so it doesn’t occur to me to see a rainbow and think, “Oh, that’s right. Thank goodness God isn’t going to destroy me.” I like the idea of God thinking “I’m just going to set this rainbow here, so you all know that I’m on the job. I’m participating in all things good for you humans down there. Don’t worry.”

So we have a rainbow on one hand, promised to us through the old testament scripture about the covenant between God and Noah. And on the other hand we have the new testament lesson from the gospel of Mark, promising that the time is fulfilled, that the kingdom of God has come near. Between those two hands, we find ourselves today. Our Lenten path will take us from that first biblical covenant all the way through to the New Covenant. The mark of the cross at our baptism marking us as Christ’s own, as children of the covenant, coupled with the mark of ashes from Ash Wednesday which reminds us of our human mortality. From one mark to the other, from one covenant to another, we are promised God’s love and grace and mercy and care, forever.

Amen.

1Bergant, Diane, Feasting on the Word series, Year B, Vol. 2, pp.27-31

2Allen, Wm. Loyd, ibid.

3Bass, Diana Butler, Sunday Musings, 2/18/24, *“From Ashes to Rainbows”*