

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
February 18, 2024 – 1st Sunday in Lent
Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:29-39

When do you give up on something? When do you modify your expectations knowing that all your effort isn't going to change anything dramatically? When do you call *something* a lost cause? When do you call *somebody* a lost cause? Or a group, or an institution? Meaning, you do not think them able to change, that they will never change their patterns and it will only be more of the same ad nauseum? There is great wisdom in knowing the difference between an appropriate letting go and a cynical giving up hope.

The story of Noah's flood is part of the pre-history section in the book of Genesis, the early story of how God deemed the brokenness of the world a lost cause. Now we tend to view God and put God in these theological boxes that depict God as stoic, unemotional, unchanging, all knowing, unflappable, etc. But the biblical stories depict God with more drama than that. In Genesis six, we see a God who created the world and is baffled and dismayed at how it went wrong. God is surprised, did not anticipate this, is sorry that he even created humans and the earth with all its plants and animals. He sees it all as marred.

Can you relate at all with this drama of disappointment? Can you relate to being baffled at how something has gone poorly, the dismay, the surprise, the not seeing it coming, the disillusionment? It happens. We build something, have a family, invest ourselves in different projects and endeavors and don't know how things can go so wonky when you've tried so hard, when you meant so well.

Genesis 6:5 says "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. 6 And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."

God deems humanity a lost cause, and so he fashions a sort of do-over. "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹² And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. ¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth." The flood imagery of the story is essentially that of **un**creation. Whereas God separated land and sea in the creation story, in the flood they are conflated, the firmament now overwhelmed with unconstrained chaos waters, back to the formless void.

And after the un-creation, comes the slow separations that Genesis one describes, land and water, vegetation, animals, and humans populating the earth. It is another creation story, a re-start. But, the flood, while making for a re-start, a new chance, a new creation, is also something God is sorry that he did. And so, with the re-start is also a promise. God promises never to do it again. God will never deal with humanity and the created world in that way again.

God makes a promise, a covenant, and that covenant is marked by the rainbow. Last week in our adult study on monuments, we talked about how a stone stood upright can act like a witness and testimony to a covenant, a physical corroboration that the covenant happened and that each part is accountable to it. But here, the covenant is sealed and marked by a natural feature, the rainbow. And the covenant commitments are really all on God, no human action needed. It is that never again will God deal with humanity in this way again. God will not wipe all humanity in a flood; God will not wipe out humanity only to start again.

Now as we talked about on Tuesday morning, we all at one time or another have experienced a flood or some natural disaster, and we may say “doesn’t this qualify,” I thought God was never going to do this again, or it may make some think the end days are coming. But I think the occurrence of flooding and natural disasters misses the point of what the Genesis story is saying. It is not about seasonal fluctuations in weather, or the rhythmic or even exaggerated flooding that happens in that flow of seasons, or due to climate changes. This story and God’s promise is about judgement. It is about God’s response to humanity’s sinfulness and propensity for rebellion, wickedness, violence, etc.

God gave up on humanity, in that God did not see them capable of change. Now he puts his hope in one that does not seem to be corrupt yet, in Noah, a righteous one. So, God puts all his hope in the corrupted, not in the possibility of change. God chooses one righteous person to re-seed the earth. But God, as depicted in the flood, did not see corrupt and wicked people as able to change, or to be redeemed, or to alter course. And God essentially conflated humanity with its sin. They were one and the same. That to get rid of its sin was to get rid of humanity, to start over. It was a lost cause, unworthy of more time, opportunities, or attempts to change them.

The story depicts God as losing hope in his own creation, own ideals, and wiping them all out, except for one man and his family who he pins his hopes on. Unfortunately, it does not take long after the re-creation with Noah’s family to be right back to the same sinful patterns.

As we begin Lent, we begin with a focus and a hope that the premise that led to the flood was wrong, was unnecessary, and we begin with a new premise: that humanity can change, can grow, can be redeemed, can still have good in it, God’s image in it. And Lent reminds us of the fact that while we can point fingers at others, we too bear the marks of sinfulness and brokenness. But the hope is that if we attend to our heart, attend to our patterns, attend to our habits, we can change, improve, repent, grow, become more capable of producing the fruit of the Spirit. A new way is possible, purifying our hearts is possible, changing our patterns is possible, redemption is not about being perfect and without flaw, but rather being capable of growth, repentance, change, renewal.

Therefore, in comparison to our Genesis story, as we look to the gospel reading, we see Jesus addressing the effects of sin and brokenness on human lives and bodies, addressing illness and demon possession, not by throwing the baby out with the bathwater, not by determining these people as lost causes, or beyond help, or as dangers to remove from society – but rather by parsing apart the person from the ill, the life from the effects of sin, the person from the bodily deterioration. He sees peoples’ humanity, and he embodies love, grace, hope, and healing.

We are told that they “they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.” We often emphasize, and scripture often comments, that they realized Jesus was more than a teacher,

but that he had power to heal. But perhaps what is wrapped up in this admission is something that should not be overlooked. That people could be healed. If we view physical, emotional, and spiritual ailments as marks of humanity's fall and sin, Jesus shows hope that the person hidden behind all that is redeemable. That their physical ailments were not part and parcel to themselves – that they were not indivisible from their conditions. Sin and its effects could be parsed apart from the person. That one was not destined to be dominated by the power and effects of one's sin, or the brokenness of humanity. But that healing and relief was possible.

Now, the healing of bodies, as Jesus was doing, brought a focus on physical healing, and the healing of Jewish villagers reiterated God's preference for Israel, both of which Jesus would try to correct. He would counteract the notion that God's healing and help was only for the Jews, and that his healing was only for physical ailments. He was, as we come to see, particularly interested in hearts, in the forgiveness of sins, and in the power to repent and change and to be participants in God's redemptive work.

And therein is the good news, that we celebrate in this season of Lent. That we are not our sin. We are not our patterns, we are not the brokenness that has affected us. We are not our physical ailments, or at least not solely. We will not be thrown out with the bathwater, we are not deemed lost causes. Rather, God sees the seed of God's image in us, sees the unique person and the human gifts and possibility. He sees the power of forgiveness and grace. And he believes that we can be changed and redeemed, and the sin and brokenness parsed apart from our humanity, and the divine image within us nurtured forth.

On Wednesday evening, some of us gathered for Ash Wednesday, beginning Lent together. And we read these words:

“Almighty and merciful God, you hate nothing you have made. There is goodness still in it despite its brokenness, despite the sin that mars and twists your good intent, your good creation. You forgive the sins of all who are penitent, who grieve with you over the sin of the world, and who are willing to turn towards your good again. For you are still at work in us, in your world. You still act with creative power and loving intent. Therefore, we submit ourselves anew.

So, as we enter this season of Lent, we enter with a sense of hope. It is the hope and the claim that we can grow, that we can change, that we can repent of unhealthy and unwholesome patterns and attitudes. That we can repent of the things that keep us at a distance from God. That we can create new patterns and practices that draw us closer to God. We renew ourselves in the gospel proclamation that we can be new creations. And we humbly admit our need for God's recreative work in us, and our own desire for it, and our willingness to repent and to work at it.

So, what will your practice be this Lent. Where is it that you wish to express hope, possibility? What is it that you are ready to change, to repent of? What stories have you been telling yourself that keep you stuck in the same patterns? In what ways are you ready to press into the hope of redemption, of change, of growth – to believe you can parse the brokenness and its entrenched patterns apart from your person, from the heart that can be forgiven and made new?

May it be for us a blessed lent.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Genesis

Chapter 6: 11-17

¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹² And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. ¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. ¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵ This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ¹⁶ Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. ¹⁷ For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.

Chapter 9

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."

Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House

(Mt. 8:14–17; Lk 4:38–41)

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

(Mt 4:23–25; Lk 4:42–44)

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸ He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.