

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
February 18, 2024
Genesis 9:8–17, Mark 1:9–15

Let us pray for the presence of God’s Spirit.

Almighty and merciful God, we pray that we may be open to you and to your word. Help us to hear you, that in hearing, we may understand your will, in understanding that we may follow where you lead. In Jesus’s name, amen.

Genesis 9:8–17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 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. 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.”

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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 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 of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 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.” 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.”

Mark 1:9–15

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

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

This Sunday marks the first Sunday of Lent. Historically in the church, Lent was most associated with a special period of time for those preparing for baptism which then occurred at Easter. It was a time of study and reflection to prepare for the sacrament. Lent is often used in this way today as well by some congregations. While that is not the case at Oak Grove, we are pleased today to have welcomed new members to Oak Grove.

While the time of Lent may not be a time of preparation for baptism or membership, for many Christians it is a particular time to ask deep questions about our relationship with God and with our neighbors. The journey of Lent is meant to invoke questions of how we live our lives. How are we living toward God? How are we living toward ourselves? How are we living toward our neighbor? Lent encourages us to ask these

questions and to honestly reflect on how we answer them, and then make the necessary changes in order to live in a more just way toward God, ourselves, and neighbors.

Traditionally, the time of Lent is a time when one can focus on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving or service. In some sense, these practices relate to the relationships we have with God, ourselves, and our neighbors and allow us to consider them with a renewed sense of purpose. Prayer rightly reminds us of and focuses on our relationship with God. Prayer allows us to not only speak to God, but maybe more importantly, listen for where God is leading us in our life. While many in the Presbyterian Church don't fast, some do. Some consider fasting as a means to call a person to dependence on God, or to practice at forgoing and resisting temptation, or to turn our real hunger pains and focus our hunger toward seeking wisdom and guidance from God. Almsgiving, or service, is a means to focus our energies outward toward our neighbors. It is to use our resources of time, money, and gifts in the service of others.

In more recent times, these three practices have often been framed as a person taking some sort of action that will bring them closer to God, giving up an action or vice that takes them away from God, and using those two things, either taking on a practice, or giving up an action and take that time or money and spend it toward a charitable organization.

More often than not, Lent becomes focused on giving up something. I read in several articles and listened to at least one blog this week that focused on what people were giving up. If you google "what to give up for lent," you get pages and pages of results. What I think is ironic, is that it seems that in talking about what to give up in order to focus on God, seems at times, to put the focus squarely back on us. Which isn't what Lent is meant to do at all. It's not about what we give up.

This is where the story of the covenant with Noah from Genesis can be helpful. The story is familiar to many of us because it is so popular, even outside the church. The story of Noah's ark is a popular, particularly telling aspect of the story to children. The scene is painted on or displayed on many church nursery walls, including ours. You can find children's books, and stuffed animals, and fisher price arks, and board puzzles, and all sorts of toys that focus on the story. It makes sense with the big boat, and pairs of all the animals on the ark, the elephants, and giraffes, and lions, and all kinds of birds. It's fun. And it also speaks in many ways to the love of God and of God's hope. It tells children that in the midst of the chaos of the world, God will gather you up and save you and never forget you.

But honestly, I have always been a little puzzled by the way we have turned this particular biblical story into a children's story. Yes, the big ark and all the animals are the stuff for kids but the whole story is rather dark and frightening. The whole reason for the ark is because God is wiping the slate clean and starting over again. God is un-creating the very thing that God created. God is wiping out the world. This is not the stuff of children's stories!

Prior to our reading this morning, God has become upset over the evil ways of humanity, and laments ever creating people in the first place. It really isn't that difficult to imagine, after all, you can read any newspaper or turn on any news program and have plenty of evidence of the violence, greed, destruction, corruption, and evil in the world. Is it any wonder that the opening of the flood story in Genesis starts with, "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." It is no surprise that God despairs over humanity and their treatment of one another and the world.

Perhaps it isn't surprising either, that God isn't bent on total destruction, that God cannot *fully* destroy all that God has made. While God does want justice, scripture also tells us over and over again that God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounds in steadfast love. It is not in God's nature to destroy, rather it is to create and to save. God cannot utterly destroy the world. Instead, God finds a righteous family, and charges them with caring for every living thing that God's creation may prevail. God will not destroy everything, instead God will start again with those on the ark.

After the flood waters recede, and after the inhabitants of the ark have departed, God does a surprising thing. God makes a promise to never do it again, and creates a covenant with Noah, and all who come after Noah. God promises that the earth will never be destroyed again.

This covenant with humanity, indeed all of creation, is remarkable. First it is stunning because in the covenant it is God that is bound by the covenant. Nothing is required of creation in this new covenant. If Adam and Eve were told not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, no such demands or limitations are put upon Noah or his family in this covenant.

Secondly, the limits in the covenant are placed on God *by* God. It is God that is limiting God's ability. It is God that is giving up something in this new arrangement with creation. God "binds God's own self to humanity, and indeed all the world, in a new and different way. God is no longer only the creator; God is now also the protector, committed to refrain from punishing humanity or destroying the world."¹

This is a new characteristic for God. Scripture speaks of God the creator that is so powerful that God merely had to speak creation into being. Scripture speaks of God's power, and justice, and patience, and love, but

¹ David J. Lose, Feasting on the Word Commentary, Year B, Volume 2, page 29

now, in this account with the covenant with Noah, God becomes a god that is self-giving and willing to enter into relationship with humanity marked by a relationship of self-limiting love and sacrifice.

God creates a self-imposed and unilateral boundary that declares, “never, never. never again shall there be a flood that will destroy the earth.” And as a reminder of this covenant promise, God puts a bow in the sky as a reminder, for God! God puts the bow in the clouds and says, “I will see it and remember,” the covenant. God enters into relationship with us in a whole new way, enters into relationship with a creation that will continue to be disloyal even in the face of God’s loyalty; will continue to do evil even in the face of divine love; will continue to do violence even in the face of mercy. God does something new. Because the creation is not able and will not stop the spiral of violence, God covenants to do so. God will not answer violence and rejection with violence and rejection.

The God of the covenant after the flood is a God that is willing to engage in a new way, is willing to change. This is a God that is adaptable, that is touched by God’s own creation, this is a God that is willing to risk being hurt and not hurt in return, this God will live into hope. The only way that this God is unchanging is God’s unwillingness to give up on creation.

It is God that gives up something in order to be in relationship with us, to suffer with us, to grieve with us, to rejoice with us. God is no distant force, but rather God is in relationship with us directly, and surrenders this distance in order to be in relationship with us, no matter what. Often God is likened to a parent, and in this instance, even though the metaphor can be fraught for many, I think it is helpful. Any loving parent who makes the decision to have a child makes a self-giving and self-limiting decision, at least for some amount of time. Parents bound in

love make many sacrifices that may have been difficult to imagine prior to having children. I have one friend, who after having a child, realized that the dream of living in an apartment in Paris was probably gone for a while, if not always. Any time we enter a genuine and loving relationship there will be times of self-sacrifice. What is amazing in this instance is that this act of self-giving, of self-limiting love is taken by the divine, the creator of the cosmos.

The significance for us of the covenant with Noah and his descendants, is that the self-giving, the self-limiting God who is willing to sacrifice divine freedom that shows up in Genesis comes more fully in the passion of Jesus at Easter, for which this time in Lent prepares us. Lent then, becomes a time when we can focus, not on an all-powerful, all-knowing God, but rather on a God who uses the paradox of the cross, who becomes strong in weakness, becomes truly our God in the vulnerability and scandal of the cross. Lent becomes a time for us to consider a God who fully embraces us by fully embracing all of our experiences, even suffering and death.

If the story in Genesis, in the self-limiting and self-sacrificing love of God in the covenant with Noah, points toward Jerusalem and the act of self-giving love on the cross, it also invites us to consider our own relationships. If God is willing to give up so much to be in relationship with us, what then are we willing to give up to be in right relationship with God, with ourselves, and with our neighbors. If we, have been the recipients of such mercy, if God sees us as worthwhile, how much might we try to do the same?

Maybe Lent isn't so much about giving up chocolate, or pizza, or swearing, or social media, or soda, or alcohol, or whatever other ideas you find in your google search, but maybe instead it's about giving up something all together more powerful, and something that truly points us

toward God. Maybe it's about giving something up that holds great power in your life, but is more destructive than beneficial, more damaging than encouraging, more hateful than loving. Maybe Lent is a reminder to give up on things like hatred, resentment, shame, anger, pessimism, or indifference. Maybe it's to give up on the temptation to be selfish, or negative, or blaming, or guilty.

I can't answer what it might be for you, what that wilderness or temptation might be for you. But I can tell you, that wherever you need to go in this journey of Lent, (or perhaps even beyond Lent), whatever you might need to give up or leave behind, whatever temptation you might need to resist, whatever wilderness you might face, God has been there, and more importantly, God has committed, has covenanted to never give up on us. Amen.