

Sermon

“Covenant”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, February 21, 2021

First Sunday in Lent

Prayer For Illumination:

Lord God, the prophet Jeremiah gives us the image of your motherly compassion, a tenderness so great that in the moment of contemplation of our apostasy your “womb-trembles.” (Jeremiah 31:20 — See Phyllis Tribble’s seminal work — *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality pp.43-45*)

Great and mighty you are! And yet, also tender enough and humble-enough to be deeply hurt by our behavior. This is the divine paradox that keeps us returning to you.

We come as victims:

- † **Of the ravages of a world-wide pandemic**
- † **of old grudges which refuse to find healing**
- † **of injustice in both the market-place and the courtroom**
- † **of a broken society evermore scattered to the edges of trouble by competing ideologies.**

And we come as sinners who “own” our part of what is wrong:

- † **With our quick inclination to judge others**
- † **our parsimony in the presence of other’s need**
- † **our indifference to the damage we do to your creation**
- † **our surrender to the spiritual malady of acedia which leads us to no longer care**

We come hoping that you have a Word for us...a plan for renewal . . . a hope for tomorrow...a vision which tells us that you have not yet given up on us, or on this creation which you love.

So give us ears to hear and hearts to hold the gift you bring today in the reading of scripture and the proclamation of a word. In this moment we are your creatures, and we know it.

We pray this in the name of the One who was the Word-become-flesh and who had his own season of wilderness temptation and wandering — even Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Mark 1:9 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.”

Mark 1:12 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.

Mark 1:14 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.”

Gen. 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.”

- I. Given the weather of the month of February here in Cary I wonder if I am the only one who has wondered if God was up to the whole 40 days and 40 nights thing again?**
 - A. Every three years on the first Sunday in Lent we are given the story of God’s covenant-making work in Genesis 9.**
 - 1. I suppose this is meant to provide encouragement to us — to remind us that God is the kind of God who keeps re-engaging in this troubled relationship, trying to make it work.**
 - B. And yet, I wonder if - by skipping to the happy-conclusion of a story which truly began in chapter 6 we miss the depth of the change which is announced in chapter 9.**
 - C. So, let us at least remind ourselves of what has come before:**
 - † God makes a creation which God loves and admires — calling it “good” at every stage.**

- † **God makes creatures which are in some way made in the “image of God.” and calls those creatures (us) “very good.”**
- † **We are then set up in God’s creation to till it and keep it and to enjoy it and multiply in it.**
- † **But immediately we show ourselves to be disobedient insurrectionist who want to be God ourselves. (Chapter 3)**
- † **One turns the page of one’s Bible to find that in Chapter 4 we have moved from rebellion to murder (Cain’s killing of Abel).**
- † **Chapter 5 is a long genealogy ...**
- † **Chapter 6 begins with a bizarre narrative about the Sons of God coming down and impregnating the daughters of men and creating a race of giants called Nephilim.**
 - **(I bet you never heard *that* mentioned in a sermon before!)**

† **So that in verses 5-7 God says,**

Gen. 6:5 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.”

II. Perhaps we can empathize with God in this...

- A. We discover that an important relationship has been betrayed by another who will not love us and honor us and we remove every object which might remind us of the failed love.**

OR

B. We have project into which we have poured all we have for years which collapses and we wash our hands of the whole thing and begin anew with a clean slate to recreate ourselves and our work and the meaning of our life.

OR

C. Some family-member: parent, child, sibling, cousin shows again and again that they cannot or will not be kind and respectful and, in an act of self-preservation, we say, “enough is enough!” and we remove ourselves from contact because (as my mother used to say) “that dog bites.”

D. God creates a world full of good and beautiful things and good creatures — only to watch it refuse to be what it was made to be — and especially the creatures made in God’s own image . . . and God says, “Enough!”

1. And for a moment God says, in essence, “to hell with you!” and all of the frustration and wrath floods in and strips-clean the creation of all that might remind God of our chaotic-inclinations.

2. The prophet Isaiah gives us a parallel description:

*Is. 54:8 In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the LORD, your Redeemer.*

III. We might ask, how does this happen — this profound reversal in the heart of God?

- † From indictment 6:5-7 — to restoration
- † From destruction — to recreation
- † From lawsuit — to salvation oracle
- † from wrathful anger — to promissory vow...

A. It happens because *God remembers!*

- † God remembers the hopes and dreams of creation
- † God remembers God's original intentions
- † God remembers that this is a *relationship* which — for God's own sake — requires fidelity from God's side . . . even when we refuse to reciprocate.

B. A moment ago I references Isaiah but I did not give you the second part of the oracle:

*Is. 54:8 In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the LORD, your Redeemer.*

*Is. 54:9 This is like the days of Noah to me:
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.
10 For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,*

says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

IV. Now , perhaps, we are ready to hear about God’s covenant announced in Genesis 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.”*

... God does the equivalent of taping a note to God’s refrigerator door “I will see the bow and I will remember...”

A. Let us notice something:

† **This is *not* ultimately a story about good people who win God’s favor . . . though God praises Noah for his righteousness . . .**

*** THREE VERSES LATER VERSE 20!
things are already coming unravelled
again!**

B. This is about God choosing covenant with us *again* but this time not naively.

- † God knows our capacity (maybe even our propensity) for chaotic, violent, disobedience . . . and yet, for God’s part . . . there is fidelity to a covenantal relationship.
- C. The question for you and for me is this:
 - “Will we be faithful to this relationship with our Creator? Will we love what God loves:
 - † *all creation*
 - † One another
 - † Mishpot, Zedikah, Hesed
 - † Will this covenant which is so costly to God be a relationship which we allow to become costly to us?”
- D. Costly to us in that it demands our:
 - † Time — how much time have we given to God and God alone lately?
 - † Talent — How have we used the gifts God has given us to join God in the redemption of the world?
 - † Money — how generous have we been in sharing the blessings which have been showered down upon us?
- E. Love is a costly business and we cannot pretend we love God and love our neighbors if we refuse to have those relationships cost us something.
- V. So, to close — a few tips for “Keeping a Holy Lent”
 - A. If you are going to give something up for Lent, don’t give up something trite like candy . . . give up doing and thinking things which you know are inconsistent with the heart of Christ.

† Let it be firmly fixed in your mind that what you do and think has the capacity to break God's heart . . . and resolve that you will stop doing those things that hurt God.

B. Make daily time to be with God and *God alone*:

† pray

† journal

† simply rest in God's grace

† practice self-examination

† see what happens in solitude and silence...

C. God waits for us to respond.

† God yearns to have us come visit

† God hopes to see us become the kind of children God can be proud of . . .

Our response to these impulses in God are the business of Lent for we who call ourselves God's children.