

The Rainbow Connection
First Sunday of Lent - Year B - 02/21/2021

Psalm Reading: 25:1-10

1st Reading: Mark 1:9-15 and 1 Peter 3:18-22, 2nd: Gen. 9:8-17

I have been at sea and seen water mountains rise up fifteen stories tall. I have been in driving rain so hard that you could not see five feet in front of the windscreen of the ship. I have felt the deluge soak me to the very core of my being. I have been on the bridge of a ship being tossed about like a toy in a bathtub and wondered, at that stark moment, if any of the 380 sailors on board would see the morning, or if all of us would be carried 12,000 feet down to the soundless depths, not to rise again until judgment day.

In the throws of a mighty storm at sea there comes a jumble of feelings, sorrow, determination, powerlessness, awe, and to some degree, resignation. No land is in sight. It seems like the ocean goes on forever, beyond all your imagining. You think that you would like to see a bit of land so you could get a firm footing, but truthfully, getting tossed onto that land would be your doom and the doom of every person on board. But that is not a concern because there is nothing on the charts for hundreds of miles, and so you just steam on, right into the face of those water mountains, climbing higher and higher until its crest washes over you and the 14,000 tons of steel and human flesh races down into the valley only to meet the rise of another mountain.

Yes, I have seen the power of God's nature through the darkness, and I can only vaguely imagine the terror that must

have been felt on board the Ark as that massive craft bobbed like a cork on that all consuming sea that covered the world. It was, after all, just a wooden craft. A big one yes, but perhaps even more vulnerable for all of that, loaded with animals of every sort, each one carrying on in its own way in the diluvian madness that must have engulfed those forty days of rain while water spouted from the very ground itself.

God must have been truly angry with the world. Humanity must have gone beyond ordinary standards of evil to warrant such a fate, or had it? Maybe the ones who had been drowned in the early days had been the lucky ones. They, at least, had escaped the daily fear and horror of life on the rudderless ark. Noah and his family must have been shaken to the core by their experience. Unlike the animals, they knew what it had all been about. They knew how close humanity and every living land-walking (or crawling) creature had come to being totally annihilated. Yet they had been saved, but for what? A life of fear that this angry God would sweep in again at the next sin and again destroy the world?

I think one of the lessons that we can learn from the deluge is that sin is such an awful thing that it does merit God's anger. As Paul would recognize in his letter to the Romans chapter 6, verse 23, "The wages of sin is death..." When we sin we not only defy God's laws, but we hurt each other and by extension we violate the just love of our creator.

The Ark finally touched land at Mount Ararat. God told the seemingly reluctant Noah to leave the ark. The family and all the animals disembarked. But I can imagine them moving gingerly about on wobbly legs, looking for any sign of rain in the

sky, not wanting to get too far from the relative safety of the Ark, not trusting their God. I have talked before about the fear of God being a good thing, but that kind of fear is a fear of disappointing God the lover of our souls. What Noah and his family were experiencing at this moment was raw, it was visceral, it was existential.

You can well imagine God looking on this scene. These humans were made in the Lord's image. They were capable of great things. Humanity was capable of so much. It was capable of bravery, creativity, love, joy, and sorrow. It was capable of logical thought and great feeling. It could do so much, but it was held back by one thing. Humanity was held back by raw fear of God. They feared the all-encompassing destructive power of God's hand that could lay waste to an entire planet.

In order to be able to trust in God's love instead of fearing God's anger, Noah and his family needed to know that God was not going to again destroy the world for human sin. Noah's descendants unto, yes, even our generation and beyond had to come to understand that God is a protector, that this is a God of love.

After the lesson of the flood that sin is evil and deserves to be severely punished, this could only come in baby-steps, and so God came to Noah and made his first covenant with humanity. It is sometimes called the "Noahic Covenant". Many covenants are two sided agreements, but this covenant that God made with Noah was not two-sided, nothing was required from Noah, but God gave all. Perhaps God felt that Noah and his family had already paid enough in suffering.

And this is what God said, “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you.” God made a promise not only to Noah, but to all who will come after, and just to be complete, God made this promise to all of the animals as well!

And this is what God promised, “Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” So this covenant that God makes with all humanity is one that is designed to bring comfort and assurance to the few people who remained. It was an exhibition of God’s grace to Noah, and also a representation of God’s grace to us.

We often find that there are episodes in the Old Testament that carry symbolic weight when we get to the Gospels and the epistles of the New Testament. This is one of them. Remember we talked about Romans 6:23 in the context of how bad sin is... The verse begins, “The wages of sin is death...” and we can imagine the flood as a stark illustration of that. But that is not the end of the verse, or even Paul’s sentence. Paul continues by saying, “but the gift of God is eternal life...” Making the connection between Noah and Paul we can see that though the promise the Lord makes to Noah is not one of eternal life for an individual human it is one that protects life in the world. God will not again destroy the earth by flood.

This is a marvelous promise far beyond what humanity deserves, but God makes the promise out of compassion and love for the people. The promise is made and a beautiful apparition appears. It is a rainbow. And God says, “I have set

my rainbow in the clouds and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

Now, there might be something that you have never thought of with regard to a rainbow. Just what is a bow? Those of you who are hunters will certainly think of the bow in connection with arrows, and hunting, or even primitive warfare. And you would not be wrong, at least many theologians would agree with you. It is thought that making the hanging bow a sign of a covenant of permanent peace bears a great deal of significance. It is that God symbolically refrains from any adversarial relationship with all of humanity.

Whenever you see a rainbow in the sky don't you feel a sense of awe and wonder and perhaps aesthetic pleasure in the beauty of it? It is human nature instilled in us by God, perhaps to make a connection between the Lord and us. We may see a rainbow twice or thrice in the summer, and most of us will remark upon it when talking with our neighbors. A double rainbow is even more rare, and on exceptional occasions you may even see a triple rainbow. It is no wonder that for many people rainbows take on so much significance, making it symbolic of peace within the diverse nature of humanity.

So, God continues to speak to Noah, “Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures.” (It is a reminder to us as well.) And when does a rainbow appear? As the reading tells us, when the clouds gather. So no matter how bad things get from a human point of view, or how bad they may appear from a natural point of view, humanity is reminded that it has nothing to fear from God.

For Noah, this promise from God frees them from fear. Now that the horror of the flood is past they can get on with their lives. This is similar to our New Covenant with God. That line from Romans is not finished yet. You remember the first part said, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life...” But there is a little more to that sentence, it that the eternal life is “in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And this little addition is where the crucial difference between the Old Testament promises and the New Testament promise occurs. Before Christ came God was promising not to take away all life by flood. God was promising to maintain the status quo, but it was only after Christ came that we are promised eternal life and this promise is made through the life and the death on the cross of Jesus Christ followed by his rising again.

So you can see that there is a connection between the promise that God made to Noah signified in the rainbow. And that promise from Noah reaches across the centuries to us. Within it the new promise is prefigured. Just as the promise in the rainbow freed Noah and the earth from danger of total destruction due to the sins of humanity, the new promise in and through Jesus Christ frees us from the eternal consequences of our own sins.

Noah and his family had to go through that harrowing time on the ark to finally be saved. Jesus went through the harrowing time for us on the cross so that we might be free of the sins of the past if we only believe.

Lent is the time when we remember what Christ has done for us. Let us then reflect on what it must have been like for

Noah and his family, living in terror for so long. Consider what it must have been like for Christ on the Cross. Through this we might come to an understanding of the suffering and death that is due to sin and to realize the graciousness of our Holy God, Christ, who has saved us from suffering and death, taken on all of that suffering for us. My friends, in a little less than 40 days of Lent, on Easter Day, we will celebrate Christ's rising and our liberation from that sin.

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