

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The First Sunday of Lent: February 18, 2024

The Full Rainbow Story

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Good morning and welcome to the first Sunday of Lent. And so, it seems, our weather (like our readings today) involves floods and water. And although we may like or dislike the rain, most of the time we have no fear that it will eventually end. This is not the time to build an ark, even if it feels like it. But instead, let's look for the rainbow.

Albert Einstein once said, "Our science when measured against reality is childlike." I remind you of this quote to put our readings into context. In order to understand the reality of Jesus, through a Biblical perspective, one must understand that the book of Genesis is an ancient writing that ascribes meaning to those lives being lived at that time. But due to their spiritual wisdom (credited to the Spirit of God's inspiration) these stories are written to teach us to have better lives.

Thus, today I would like to talk about our "rainbow story", as it is often called. The most common interpretation is very much a children's story of animals and rainbows. This is a story about God's love for animals, about remembering God's love each time we see a rainbow, even about the bright side of every storm. It's a beautiful way to introduce God as creator, but it remains simple.

The second common interpretation is a story that is most definitely not for children. In this interpretation, God is so angered by human rebellion that God floods the whole earth, wiping out nearly everything in a fit of divine rage. This is a story about a God whom you'd be crazy to want to have anything to do with, a God of wrath who is ready and willing to strike down sinners. This theology leads one down a path of judging others, is self-destructive and can eventually lead to violence.

Neither of these theories consider the whole story and neither contains much truth. The truer story is that God has a myriad of ways of calling us back to the harmony that God intended for us. Our text for today, in which God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, tells us that God is hanging up the bow, putting aside forever the option of destruction and seeking a relationship with humanity as God's own.

The entire flood narrative is the culmination of a story of increasing human sinfulness that begins in Genesis chapter 3. There we first see that sin results in disharmony between humans and other creatures, between male and female, and between humans and their earthly labors. Disharmony intensifies in chapter 4, in which the first murder, fratricide, occurs.

The genealogy of chapter 5 draws the link from Adam's generation to Noah's, in order to highlight the downward spiral of humanity. Finally, chapter 6 narrates the breaking of God's harmonious world. In the coupling of heavenly and earthly beings, the boundary between the two realms is shattered.

Now I understand that when you look at ancient writings like these you may question the validity or the science of this story. Historically we have proof there was a flood, not over the entire world, but a large portion of what was known of the world at the time. This event was also recorded by several ancient cultures. But when digging deeper into the spiritual and existential meanings, we have to admit there is Divine inspiration, because there is a deep-down knowing that a truth in some fashion is being displayed.

The importance of this scripture is to reveal God's response to this realization of sin and disobedience that was beyond measure but it is not one of anger or revenge. Rather, God was "sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." God sorrows over the corruption of the beings that God made with such care and love. And God's heart, in striking contrast to the evil inclination of the human heart, is grieved by this human betrayal. God is pained by the brokenness of creation. God sends the flood, then, not as an act of revenge, but out of grief over the rending of a right human relationship with God. Note that the human betrayal of God's intention has effects beyond human beings; human sin has issued in the corruption of all the earth, and therefore in its eventual destruction.

We know in today's Gospel that Jesus is whisked away to be tempted, again, in every way that we are. Yet he will turn down all Satan's propositions. God will again prevail. Not a God that returns evil for evil, but instead one that grieves at our human uses of free will.

Thus, all of creation is given a new beginning in our Genesis tale today, a new opportunity to live in the harmony that God intended. Note, however, that this

new beginning is also a continuation; God does not create new beings, but instead begins anew with a remnant of the beings created at the beginning.

The sign of this covenant, God's bow in the clouds, is precisely the bow of battle. Ancient depictions of a deity armed with bow and arrow are not unusual. To hang up one's bow is to retire from battle. That bow in the clouds is the sign of God's promise that whatever else God does to seek our restoration, complete destruction is off the table.

As we journey toward Holy Week, once again we will witness God's people being called into covenant with God through cleansing water. Once again there is a sign from God at the Jordan, just as the bow in the sky reminds us of God's promise to continue a relationship with us, in our Gospel today we are shown the dove of the Holy Spirit – God's peace.

As we reflect this week, what would it mean to you to understand a God that grieves with you when you miss the mark, instead of a God of anger? What does it mean to you that Jesus has the power to say no to the human temptations of lust, power and greed, not from anger, but from love? Would knowing that change who you are?

Welcome to Lent. Amen