**February 18, 2018
A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent
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**GOSPEL Mark 1:9-15**

The holy gospel, according to Saint Mark, the first chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”
  12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.
  14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

The Great Flood of Genesis…is a…difficult…part of our spiritual ancestry…

 to put it mildly.

It is a shadowed, eerie tale of a corrupt people and an angry God.

 And it is much more unsettling than the nursery decorations

 and children’s books it has inspired might make it seem.

The last time I heard it was at a Godly Play workshop,

 the day after Hurricane Harvey made landfall.

 (Godly Play is a method for the spiritual nurture of children

 practiced around the world that we use here at Peace

 that tells stories from Scripture with visual materials.)

On that day, I watched the storyteller lift

 and rock a wooden boat above her head…

 until it was as if we were all looking at it from under the water…

 and at that same moment,

 through the tall windows on either side of the room

 where we sat in a circle

we saw sheets of water riding down on gusts of wind that bent the trees,

 while Rockport and Bayside and so many places not so far away…

 we would find out soon…really were under water.

The way God is shown in this story is unsettling.

 God seems to express surprise at humanity’s depravity

 and even regret at our existence…

 the same God who looked at us only a few chapters ago

 and pronounced us very good.

 Did God change God’s mind?

 Was God right one time and wrong the other?

 Which assessment of humanity do we believe most?

If we believe in a God who is all-knowing and unchanging

 then this inconsistency is hard to reconcile.

I once heard a rabbi give a lecture on the God of the Hebrew Bible

 using the analogy of a new parent.

He suggests that in Scripture we witness a God who learns…

 much like a parent who adapts as the children grow and change

 and find new ways drive them nuts.

God learns, in the Garden, that humans will disobey…

 will decide for themselves what they want

 without trusting God’s good intentions…

 despite God having done nothing but love them to earn their defiance.

And then we come to Noah…

 and the time when again God learns…

 that humanity is capable of worse things than seemed possible.

And God learns even more than that as the story unfolds…

And humanity, we know,

 hasn’t had the ability to do terrible things drowned out of it.

 Do we ever know it.

I imagine not many of us have walked into a movie theater, church, or school

 without thinking, at least for a moment,

 of what it might be like if these ordinary landmarks of our days

 became the next targets of horror like we’ve seen too often –

 across this country.

 So recently in Las Vegas, Sutherland Springs…and now Parkland…

 Together, we might not be able to come up with all the names

 of the places where mass shootings have happened in the last ten years…

And I have no doubt we couldn’t name the seemingly countless victims.

What would it be like to live in a world where violence was so rare

 that we could remember the victims’ names?

That Ash Wednesday, also Valentine’s Day…

 when so many people remembered both love and mortality

 should have become the day of yet another mass murder

 of children in school by one of their peers

 is perhaps the most undeniable way the veil could be torn away, again,

 to show the wilderness in which we live…

the evil of which humans are capable.

It is clear that we do not live in the sanitized,

 children’s nursery version of this story.

But what will we do?

 How will our story unfold?

If we can be of any good at all to this suffering world…

 to ourselves and others who have been beaten, broken,

 shot at, disregarded…abused, neglected…denied, and unloved…

 then we are going to have to be honest about how hard our own story is…

and how much work we have to do.

We get nowhere denying it.

 We are going to have to fight through the anesthetized feeling that

 overpowers us in the face of evil and danger.

We are going to have to own our stake in our collective story…

 to meditate on the beauty and terror of the knowledge

 that we are in this together,

 and what we do and give and take

changes many more lives than our own.

Such is Lent.

 This is the work that is before us.

Knowing ourselves more fully – even when we would flinch or turn away…

 and walking behind Jesus where he leads…

 even when we begin to see that the cross is what looms in the distance…

 and are able to imagine what that might mean…

both for him and for us.

It is a daunting path.

 But there is more that God shows us in Genesis

 about the path forward from here.

Today we see God finding a new way forward

 when the waters recede from the earth…

 and we find out what else God has learned…

God has learned that meeting destruction with destruction

 hasn’t solved the problem…

And the story will bear this out –

 evil is still at work in the world after the Flood.

And what does God do with what God learns?

 As the waters recede and the inhabitants of the ark

 set their feet down again on dry ground,

 God sets God’s bow in the clouds and proclaims a promise – a covenant.

A rainbow…a beautiful…translucent arch

 that seems to bend heaven down closer to earth…

 but a bow is a weapon.

If you’ve ever been on the wrong side of one, it is a frightening thing.

 What destruction could God’s bow bring to earth

 if it were plucked up out of the sky again…

 if all our evil was met with equal evil in repayment?

Maybe we should be more afraid of rainbows.

Except we don’t have to be…

 because the promise of the rainbow is that God put it down.

God set it down…into the sky for us to see…

 like taking out your weapons and laying them on the table

 before negotiating a treaty or truce…not concealed…but placed in sight…

God chose to disarm after seeing what the Flood did.

 When God saw human violence met with the violence

 that came from God’s own anger, shame, and regret…

God learned that it wasn’t any good…and said ‘never again.’

 And God laid down arms.

I’ve heard it said before that God’s covenant with Noah

 was the first endangered species act,

 because God says to Noah that this is

 “a covenant made with every living creature that is with you,

 the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal that is with you,

 as many as came out of the ark…”

God’s creatures are witnesses and participants in the covenant.

 What a beautiful company to keep…

But what if this wasn’t just the first endangered species act?

 What if it was the first disarmament treaty, too…

 and perhaps one of the only truly unilateral disarmaments ever known?

God didn’t have to lay down arms. God chose to.

 Why?

 We don’t really know.

Maybe it was because God watched in those days

 when no one else could see…

 because the ark was shuttered against the gale…

 and every other living thing with eyes to see

 no longer had the breath of life left in it…

 and that horror changed God’s heart.

Maybe God did it to show us how.

In Lent, especially now, we face horror and shame and regret…

 and we have the chance to change our hearts.

 To lay down arms. To repent…

 which means not so much to confess sin…

 but to commit to a new way.

Today, we also hear (again) of Jesus’ baptism in Mark,

 and the Evangelist’s very short description

 of his wilderness temptation that followed…

 and how Satan was there…

 and he was with the wild beasts, and how angels waited on him.

I wonder if there was ever any rain in the desert during those days…

 I wonder if Jesus saw any rainbows in those long forty days

 and was reminded of God’s promise to his ancestors.

I wonder if seeing the bow would have made him want to reach out

 and grab it up again, knowing what was coming…

 or if he was fully ready, even then,

 to walk the path that was in front of him.

Maybe it didn’t rain, though. It is the desert after all.

 Maybe Jesus didn’t need any reminder of the options in front of him.

 Or maybe the presence of the animals…the wild beasts….

 the ones who share in Noah’s covenant…was reminder enough.

In Lent we come to,

 not the first, but maybe the truest,

 test of God’s promise…

God’s own willingness to face death

 rather than pick up the weapons at hand

 to answer our destructive actions with God’s own.

If ever there is a time to aim the bow back at earth,

 it is when Jesus is crucified.

 And God doesn’t do it.

We receive again today the promise of a God who has laid down arms,

 so he can open his arms to all in an act of self-giving love

 we can only hope to understand.

We enter Lent to see again how God chooses to heal the world.

 And to seek to follow.

We need these things now as much as we ever have.

May you find strength for the path ahead.

 It is not an easy one.

 But we will not be alone.

Amen.