



Liturgical Day: The First Sunday in Lent

Date: March 1, 2009

Sermon Title: Promise, Assurance, Hope

God's gift to Noah
the sign of the covenant
never fear again

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When I was in High School, it wasn't especially cool to be a Christian. Those were the seventies: rebellion and free thinking were much more appealing to young people in my town than faithfulness and living within a tradition. But I'll tell you what: if you were a Christian, it was especially cool to have one of these: a Bible that included just the Psalms, the Proverbs and the New Testament. As a matter of fact, so many people had these Bibles that some of them began to think that the Psalms came just after the book of Revelation in every Bible.

There are a number of reasons why these Bibles became so popular. They were free. They fit in your shirt pocket. The family of a World War II soldier gave me this one – it was issued to soldiers by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Its front cover is made out of metal, and stories are told of bullets that these Bibles had stopped. These are all good reasons to own one of these, I suppose. But one less admirable reason to have one of these had to do with a certain disdain for the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament. There were those who believed that in Jesus, God was doing something that was entirely new. As a matter of fact, it was so new (they thought), that it had absolutely nothing to do with how God was described in the Old Testament. So other than reading the Psalms, which were ancient poems and songs that served as good prayers (even for modern-day Christians), these people really had no interest at all in the other thirty-eight books of the Bible.

They couldn't have been more wrong – and that becomes evident in today's lesson from the ninth chapter of Genesis.

It is the familiar and favorite story of Noah and the flood – a story that I loved so much when I was a child that when my parents would read to me from my Bible stories book at the end of the day, they finally had to stop asking me which story I wanted to hear. Every day I picked Noah's Ark. It is, of course, a favorite for many kids. After all, what kid isn't drawn to animals and boats? The section that we study today comes from the very end of the story. God has become upset with the vast majority of human beings. God has destroyed the world, and all the evil that had been thriving within it. Noah and his family alone have survived the waters of the flood, and are making a new beginning on the recently dried earth.

As this morning's skit helps to point out, there are more than a few painful, lingering effects of this devastation. Perhaps the worst of them is the memory of the screams. Noah and his family had to listen to the cries of those outside the ark who were being lost. But as the skit points out, God had to listen to those cries as well. And as both the one who created those people and the one who destroyed those people, it was an especially troubling memory for God to have.

As today's text begins, God is ready to make a new beginning with Noah; a beginning that won't be an easy one to make. Noah has now learned something about the terrible righteousness of God. It will be a lesson that Noah

FIRST LESSON

GENESIS 9:8-17

PSALM

PSALM 25:1-10

SECOND LESSON

1ST PETER 3:18-22

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MARK 9:2-9

PRAYER OF THE DAY

HOLY GOD, HEAVENLY FATHER, IN THE WATERS OF THE FLOOD YOU SAVED THE CHOSEN, AND IN THE WILDERNESS OF TEMPTATION YOU PROTECTED YOUR SON FROM SIN. RENEW US IN THE GIFT OF BAPTISM. MAY YOUR HOLY ANGELS BE WITH US, THAT THE WICKED FOE MAY HAVE NO POWER OVER US, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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never forgets, and one that might well have haunted him for the rest of his life.

Just imagine: after many days in the ark (by some estimates, as many as a year), Noah understands that righteousness is so important that God is willing to destroy everything that has been made, in order to make a clean return to it. So how is Noah supposed to feel the next time those dark clouds start forming in the western sky? How is Noah supposed to feel after a good two or three day long rain storm? I'm sure that every rain drop on the roof, every thunder clap from above, every flash of lightning gets Noah to wondering how much work he would have to do if he needed to get that old ark seaworthy again.

In response to Noah's inevitable fears, God does something remarkable. God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants – a promise that will stand at the heart of the relationship these people have with their God. The promise is this: that never again will so much of creation be destroyed with a cataclysmic flood. And in addition to the promise, God gives Noah a sign. God's war bow has now been set aside in the clouds, and will become visible any time that sun pokes through on a rainy day.

This had to be a terrific relief for Noah. But what gives Noah the most relief about this promise is what it is intended to accomplish. Its main purpose is not to remind Noah of God's promise (although that is certainly how it worked – and there is no doubt that God intended this). No, the main purpose of this promise is found in verse sixteen. God says, "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant." **I** will see it and remember the everlasting covenant. The bow in the sky is a reminder to God of this new covenantal relationship.

You see, the most frightening result of the flood is that Noah now knows what God is capable of doing. And what is there to assure Noah that it won't happen again? What is there to soothe his fear that he is going to one day need to get that ark back in shape? It isn't that righteousness will no longer matter – because it does. It isn't that God will not become angry when people turn away from what is good – God will. What soothes Noah's fear is God's promise to be personally reminded of this covenant, if ever the situation should arise where it seems that the world deserves to be destroyed again. And so this bow in the sky is both a reminder to God and an assurance to Noah, that there will never again be need to be concerned about a flood.

So it is with God's rainbow, and so it is with baptism. At the heart of Noah's relationship with God is the promise, and the bow in the sky. At the heart of our relationship with God is the promise, and our baptismal waters. One aspect of our annual Lenten observance is that we turn our attention to the painful reality that we, too, are unworthy of God's grace. We, too, deserve only destruction.

But this cross stands in our midst as a reminder that God loves us enough to die for us. And in the waters of our baptism, God promises that when our day comes, and when God once again feels moved by righteousness to give us what is our due, there is another promise in place which will save each of us: the promise that when we were baptized we were baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, so that just as Christ died, we too will die. But just as Christ was raised, we too will be raised – despite God's better judgment; despite God's inclination to do away with everything that is not righteous; despite God's history of taking swift and decisive action when humanity turns from what is good and right.

This morning, we are celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Baptism with Ian Bard. As Christine and Brian present him at the font, he will receive a promise from God that is just as powerful as the one Noah received from God in those first days after leaving the ark. It is a promise that will go with him through the rest of his life. It is a promise that will last him even beyond his own death.

I don't know what kind of relationship Ian will have with God. I don't now if he will gradually grow in grace and become more faithful each year, or whether his journey of faith will be one of many twists and turns; many ups and downs. But I do know this: that in the waters of his baptism, Ian receives this morning the assurance from God that no matter where his life takes him, he will always have a home with God. No matter how far he falls from grace, he will always have the promise of God's forgiveness. And that is a promise, should he decide to allow it to find a place at the center of his life, which will never let him down.

This morning we give thanks for the promise Noah received from God. We give thanks for the assurance and hope it gave to Noah, and for the way that this Old Testament story is able to communicate the saving

grace of our God. We give thanks, as well, for the promise of our own baptism. And during this season of Lent, we pray that we might come to rely on it to give us that same assurance and hope. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 1, 2009)

First Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{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." ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; English Text:

^{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." 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. 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." ⁱⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{1,9} Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου. ¹⁰ καὶ εὐθὺς ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος εἶδεν σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ὡς περιστερὰν καταβαίνον εἰς αὐτὸν ¹¹ καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα. ¹² Καὶ εὐθὺς τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτὸν ἐβάλλει εἰς τὴν ῤημον. ¹³ καὶ ἦν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας πειραζόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ σατανᾶ, καὶ ἦν μετὰ τῶν θηρίων, καὶ οἱ γέλοιοι διηκόνου αὐτῷ. ¹⁴ Μετὰ δὲ τὸ παραδοθῆναι τὸν Ἰωάννην ἦλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ ¹⁵ καὶ λέγων τι πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ γγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεῦετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ. ^{iv}

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 9:8-17, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Mark 1:9-15, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. Mark 1:9-15, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).