

## From Ashes to the Rainbow Mark 1: 9-15; Genesis 9: 8-17

This past week, Ash Wednesday began our journey through the part of the Church Season we call Lent. Ash Wednesday is observed forty days before Easter – counting the forty days from Ash Wednesday through to Easter, minus the Sundays in each of those weeks. The placing of ashes on the forehead or hand of worshipers is a sign of mourning and repentance to God- ashes being used from early times in the Bible as a sign of extreme sorrow. Thus, the name, Ash Wednesday.

The significance of the forty days that we recognize as Lent is in both our Scriptures for this morning. In the Genesis scripture we find the story of Noah and the forty days of rain and flooding which covered the earth- even the highest mountain- leaving only Noah, his family and two of each creature on earth safe in the ark. In the gospel of Mark, immediately following his baptism, Jesus was taken into the wilderness where he remained for forty days, being tempted by Satan and ministered to by angels.

In the Scriptures for today, it seems the theme, “From Ashes to the Rainbow” is an important emphasis or picture for our mind on this first Sunday of Lent. As we are reminded of the ashes on Ash Wednesday and begin this time of Lent to consider the full meaning of Christ’s sacrifice for us- a potential of a bit of a “downer” is possible. However, rather than get mired down in the seemingly hopelessness of our human condition, we need also to keep our focus on the rainbow and the covenant with God it symbolizes.

As Noah and the rainbow begin Lent for us this year, we can start the season of preparation for Easter firmly anchored in the covenant God made with humanity long ago. It reminds us that we belong to God, no matter what. Lent invites us to look again at the idea of covenant, and what it means for us as people of faith.

The idea of “covenant” is much in the news- agreements people once considered unbreakable now seem to be up for grabs. The benefits and pensions promised to workers, once held as an unbreakable promise, have begun to seem in jeopardy. Social Security- the basic financial security for many Americans- or the social service programs to assure “no child goes to

bed hungry” are sometimes eyed as a way to cut expenses in our national budget. All human covenants are subject to change.

So, this first Sunday of Lent recalls for us God’s covenant- the only covenant on which we can place complete trust. In the Scriptures from Genesis, God has washed away almost all life on earth in the flood and now makes the first covenant in faith history. God makes this covenant with Noah and his family and – as scripture records, “with every living creature that is with you,” so it is a covenant with all of the created world. Curiously, God was so angry that the divine anger was allowed to sweep almost all life from the face of the earth in a flood, and yet God is now willing to make a promise never to do it again. Surely God must know that humankind will falter again, and wickedness will overtake us again. Even in the face of that, God chooses not to save just a few human beings and animals but makes a promise to the generations after them. This covenant is so important that it needs a sign, a reminder that God’s faithfulness to humankind is now guaranteed for all generations to come. This covenant is a powerful bond between God and humanity.

In this first of the covenants God establishes with all of God’s creatures, we can note several things:

1. There is a real accent on God’s initiative in this text. Listen to God’s words, “I am establishing my covenant”; “I establish my covenant with you”; “I will remember my covenant”; “I will see it (the rainbow) and remember the everlasting covenant.” This is not Noah knocking on the God’s door and negotiating some agreement, requesting some favor, or seeking some guarantees. This begins with God. We see over the course of Scripture’s story; this is absolutely typical. It is the nature of every individual Christian’s testimony as well. God first comes to us and God initiates the relationship and waits for us to respond.

2. There is a shocking quality to God’s initiative. To enter a covenant, after all, is to bind yourself and your future conduct by making an agreement with someone else. Yet how is it that the sovereign and eternal God should need to enter into such an agreement with God’s own creation- and thereby be bound to it until the end of time? Of course, God doesn’t NEED to do that and

the fact that God does it is just more evidence of divine grace reaching out to us and working with us in spite of all our failures.

3. This covenant includes the element of a sign and can remind us of what we now call “sacraments.” In God’s relationship with us- physical creatures that we are- God meets us where we are by using physical means or signs. Such is the nature of each sacrament that we celebrate- bread, fruit of the vine, water. So, too, when God establishes a covenant here with all living things, it is marked with a physical and visible sign of the rainbow and like the sacraments that are, “in remembrance,” this sign is a reoccurring reminder to both parties of the promise that has been made.

4. That God indicates the rainbow will be a personal sign of the covenant made with Noah seems significant- as if God would need a reminder of the covenant. However, God is quite clear in verses 14 and 15 where it says, “When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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.”

5. One more thing to note- God’s other covenants in Scripture are limited to human beings. But here, in this one instance, God’s covenant is extended to “every living creature.” One more instance of God’s incomprehensible grace.

We typically take rainbows for granted during the summer months- we expect to find them following a rainstorm. Sometimes we are even gifted with a double rainbow. But in the Middle East, a rainbow is a rare occurrence. After one or two bursts of rain, the skies are generally clear for month after month. One would really stand in awe of the rainbow when it rarely happens. When rains and the rainbow appear across dry land, it is a joyful and beautiful sight even for us who often see a rainbow several times each summer.

One other fact of the rainbow- a rainbow is made up of tiny droplets of water suspended in the air. The sun shines through these drops of water and its light is refracted, as through a prism. It is this refraction, this splitting up of white light that creates the rainbow’s bands of color- seemingly one of God’s miracles of nature. In a certain sense, therefore, the rainbow is made up of

the storm itself. The water that once cascaded down upon the earth, sometimes sweeping everything before it, has then become a reminder of grace.

Turning to our scripture from the gospel of Mark, we can note in those six verses of our lectionary reading, three major events in the life of Jesus reported: his baptism, his temptations in the wilderness and the beginning of his ministry. The gospel of Mark moves very quickly right from the beginning to who Jesus was and the importance of the good news he came to bring. Thus, Mark moves into Jesus' ministry- the purpose of which is summarized by Jesus statement in verse fifteen, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." These are the first words Jesus speaks in this Gospel of Mark.

According to Mark's gospel, before Jesus calls his disciples, heals the sick and casts out demons, he announced that the kingdom is coming near, and the time is now to repent and believe. The program of the Son of God is laid out before us. The Son, Jesus Christ, will bring the kingdom of God to earth. These are primary matters of importance to Mark and he states them briefly within the very first few verses of his gospel.

Last Sunday, the Gospel of Mark prepared us for the beginning of Lent by focusing on Jesus and stating the second time Mark records the voice that came from heaven during Jesus' transfiguration, "This is my Beloved. Listen to him." The very words used as Jesus began his ministry were heard again toward the final days of his ministry. However, we would do well to remember Jesus' first words as recorded by Mark, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." This statement alone, Biblical scholars tell us, is the entire gospel message condensed into a single sentence.

As we move from the remembrance of the Lord's Supper last Wednesday and the symbolism of the ashes as a sign of mourning, it seems important to clearly hear Jesus words- "... the kingdom of God has come near..." We should take seriously- this first Sunday of Lent- to contemplate our lives in terms of Jesus' words, "... repent, and believe in the good news." The

rainbow is an elegant reminder of life and the lectionary places the rainbow reminder just days after we have been reminded by the sign of ashes on Ash Wednesday. The ashes mark us as creatures of dust, returning to dust, frail and finite. The rainbow is the other side of the of ashes, the mark of the promise that goes beyond our limitations. Dust we are and to dust we shall return. Until that happens- as long as we are alive- the only covenant of which we can have full assurance is God's covenant to care for God's creation. May the beauty of the rainbow and what it represents, keep our hearts and minds focused on "...believe the good news..." The good news of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

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