

*First Sunday in Lent*

February 18, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 1: 9-15)

In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The Gospel of Our Lord.

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

So it's Lent. And on our Lenten journey this year we will be looking at God's great promises and what those promises mean for us today. Each week we will hear a story from scripture about a covenant, about a promise that God has for us. Today's promise is the promise of grace.

But, first, before we talk about that, we're going to talk about the story of Noah's ark. "Noah's Ark." Okay. If you know it, sing it. "*The Lord said to Noah, 'There's going to be a floody, floody.'*" "*The Lord said to Noah, 'There's going to be a floody, floody.'*" "*The Lord said to Noah, 'There's going to be a floody, floody. Get those children out of the muddy, muddy!'*" Julie knows it! You know, we do have a tendency to make that story fun. We make that story sweet and easy, with rainbows and little boats with cartoon-character animals floating along. We make this story nice.

This is a terrible story! It is about death and destruction. It is a heart wrenching, frightening, and an incredibly surprising story.

The story of Noah begins with these words:

*"In God's sight, the earth had become corrupt, and was filled with violence. God saw that the earth was corrupt because all creatures behaved violently on the earth."* (Genesis 6:11-12)

*“Behaved violently on the earth.”* Yeah. We get that part. The setting of this is all too real. We know all about gun violence, and gang violence, and violence against women. And we deal with corruption every day. Corruption of relationships into us versus them; or corruption of resources into rich versus poor; or corruption of the creation from greed or climate change. We get the setting of this story. Everyone here can speak to ways in which violence and corruption or greed and anger have impacted our own lives and our own families.

God saw that the earth was corrupt, because all creatures behaved violently on earth. No surprise on that one. We know what this story is talking about. We fear what this story is talking about. Because what if God was to decide that enough is enough? What if God gets fed up with the school shootings, or the endless political posturing, or the selfishness, or the hate? What if God gives up on us? Or, worse yet, what if God responds like we would respond? What if God gets angry and unleashes God’s power in violence?

*“The Lord said, ‘I will wipe off of the land the human race that I have created: from human beings to livestock to the crawling things to the birds in the skies, because I regret I ever made them.’”* (Genesis 6:7)

Oh-oh. Imagine a worst-case scenario, and this is it. God does not hold back from God’s anger. Listen.

*“All the springs of the deep sea erupted, and the windows in the skies opened. It rained on the earth forty days and forty nights.”*

*“The waters rose even higher over the earth; they covered all of the highest mountains under the sky.”*

*“God wiped away every living thing that was on the fertile land – from human beings to livestock to crawling things to birds in the sky. They were wiped off the earth.”*

*“The waters rose over the earth for one hundred and fifty days.”*  
(Genesis 7:11-24).

And that is a lot of anger. And a lot of water.

But this story is not about the water, and it’s not about the boat or the animals. This story is not about Noah or the dove or the rainbow. All the things that we put in the pictures and the songs are not what this story is about. This story is about God deciding to do a new thing. God starting to act in a new way. God changing God’s relationship with humans. This story of Noah and the ark is way more powerful and hopeful than we make it out to be. This story is about God doing a new thing.

After we have seen what God’s anger is capable of, we hear God say:

*"I will not curse the fertile land anymore because of human beings since the ideas of the human mind are evil from their youth. I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done. As long as the earth exists, seedtime and harvest, cold and hot, summer and autumn, day and night, will not cease."*  
(Genesis 8:21-22)

Do you hear that? Do you hear the powerful promise in that? God says that God will never again lash out in anger. God will limit Godself for the sake of humans. God's creative work with humans, God's hopes for this world, will come to pass without violence on God's part. No matter what we do, no matter how much it hurts God's heart to witness it, God will forever work in nurture and respect for human life. God limits God's power for the love of this creation, and in confidence that we can someday become what God intends, even if it takes forever. God's love takes the long view. How many years might it take to love this humanity into what God intends? Maybe an eternity, but God is in it for the long haul. This is a powerful promise. God will only work in love, for as long as it takes.

And if you look at this reading from today that we heard from Genesis, you'll see one more thing. You will see God's grace. Pure grace. Pure gift. God says, "Never again a flood. Never again life cut off. Never again destroy the earth."

But there is not a single word about what humans have to do. God doesn't say, "I will not destroy the earth if you guys shape up some." God does not say, "I will not destroy the earth if, by the next generation, you have a five-point plan for peace in the Middle East."

Nope. God says, "No matter how long it takes, no matter how much it hurts to see this, no matter what you do, I will never again resort to violence and destruction. I will work for transformation in the ways of love." Period.

This is the God we serve. The one who will love us into transformation without demand; who is willing to wait and work and suffer and love, but not willing to destroy. If you want to know what that looks like in practice, take a look at the cross. If ever there was a reason for God to get mad and destroy the earth that was it. Instead, we get Easter. The very first promise of God is grace, not anger; to work in love, not violence. And it has shaped everything ever since.

I wonder. I wonder what would it look like if the church were to make the same covenant with the world? What if we explored living and working in love without violence? What if we worked to remember the value of each person, whether we agree with them or not? What if we faced our opponents in those issues of gun violence, or immigration, or fiscal spending, or whatever, what if we faced our opponent, looking for understanding, not winning? What if we took God's lead and were willing to take the slow, future-oriented, sacrificial path to wholeness; not the fast, angry path to dominance?

God chooses love, not violence. What if the church were to do the same? What might it look like?

The Martin Luther King Center lists six principles of nonviolence. Listen to them, and think about God's promise to Noah.

- Number 1. *"Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people."*
- Number 2. *"The goal is friendship and understanding of those who are different from you."*
- Number 3. *"Defeat injustice, not people. Evil itself, not the people doing it, should be opposed."*
- Number 4. *"Accept suffering without retaliation and learn from it."*
- Number 5. *"Avoid internal violence of the spirit as well as external physical violence."*
- Number 6. *"Have deep faith in the future – that God's justice, however slow, will prevail."*

If God shows overwhelming grace to us, if God acts in love, can we imitate that? Could we receive such a hopeful gift and offer it in return?

The story of Noah is a heart-wrenching, frightening, and incredibly surprising story. It is about God doing a new thing. I wonder if we can do a new thing as well?

Amen.