

“From Water to Wilderness—The Faithfulness of God” based Mark 1:9-15 & Genesis 6:5-8, 9:8-17  
Delivered on February 21, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

This year the season of Lent seems to have a different feel for me, as it may for you. In our Presbyterian tradition this season is typically not about giving things up, though some of our churches do pursue that practice. We typically do not view this season in the same way as our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Still, it is for us a holy time when we are given the opportunity to be mindful of our journey and our opportunity to recommit to our walk with Jesus. We focus on our need to share our resources and every year our denomination calls on us to give for the ‘One Great Hour of Sharing.’ This is a time when we join Jesus and one another in our church and in the world around us on a journey to the cross, and onward to the Resurrection on the other side.

However, I think that because of the COVID pandemic which was declared during the Lent season and with all that we have been forced to give up, all that has been lost, and all that has changed in our lives, it can feel as if we are in, right now, a never-ending Lent. It is a Lenten season that has lost for us its spiritual dimension and depth, for it has become a chore, a burden and a system of works we do because we have to.

Lent is supposed to be a period of 40 days leading up to Easter. And of course, as so many of us have learned or been reminded of in the past year, the word ‘quarantine’ comes from a Latin root meaning ‘40.’ A quarantine is supposed to be 40 days, but here we are in the 50<sup>th</sup> Sunday of quarantine time, 11 months deep and waiting for it to end.

Today’s readings are both centered on a 40-day waiting period, first with Noah and the flood, and then with Jesus’s tempting and testing after his baptism and before the start of his ministry. Perhaps, this is why these are put here in the lectionary, to be the perfect readings to start off this season. However, their significance is much deeper than a 40-day coincidence as each one demonstrates for us the faithfulness of God and God’s commitment to humanity and creation.

In the story of the flood, we see that the world has grown wicked and God is grieving. Indeed, we tend to see this moment as one of God’s anger and a desire to destroy. However, it is not God’s anger here that is front and center for us, but it is God’s broken heart. It’s not God’s desire to destroy creation, but God’s desire to start over and make it new as it should be.

There is this notion that God could have just started from scratch, but God chooses to be faithful to Noah. God looks down upon creation and sees Noah and finds favor in him, to begin again. And so, God takes that option off the table. God refuses the option to destroy it all and begin from scratch and creates instead a covenant with Noah and all of creation. And the sign of this covenant is God’s war bow set in the clouds to remind God of this covenant.

But the problem, we discover, is that humanity is bent on putting itself in God’s place. The wickedness that God wanted to wash off the face of the earth was the wickedness in humanity to dominate and destroy, to oppress and exploit. But in what we did not read today, shortly after Noah gets back on land, the whole process begins again. Noah and his sons lead to the

tower of Babel where ultimately God casts everyone into a diversity of languages, after which the promise is given to Abraham and Sarah to be the parents and rulers of one family that would be a light to every nation, bringing all families back to the Lord.

So, we see this is where Jesus enters the picture. The 'beloved' Son of God baptized in those waters of the Jordan River by John. But he is also our brother. Jesus is Abraham and Sarah's son, descended from their grandson Jacob the father of the nation of Israel through which God promised again to fulfill the promise to Abraham. It is through Jesus that God establishes again a new covenant with every nation to restore and renew all of creation in him.

What we see in these texts of covenant is that the Lord, the God of all, the God of Israel, calls humanity to be a partner in God's work. We would have seen this in the story of the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. We see it in the Noah text. We will see it in the covenant with Abraham next week and in the covenant with Moses the week after. We saw it in the covenant with David we read earlier this year. This is central also to the covenant we have in Christ.

In every covenant, God calls humanity to be a partner. We are called to share in the work of dominion and creation, which is ruling over not by dominating, but participating in God's work to create and sustain life. The way of the world is at odds with this. For sin in its selfishness makes the world's default dominance and oppression, but this is not God's will. No, the God of Israel is about freedom and deliverance, even through the waters and the wilderness.

The one true God, the Lord of the Hebrew scriptures, is faithful to the covenants that have been made with humanity. The promise is not to destroy but to renew creation, to bring that great light to all nations and make all things right again. But how faithful is God to this plan? Well, God is so faithful that rather than destroy the world, the triune God chose to enter into creation, with the Father sending the eternal Son to be human like us, to live as we live, and die as we die.

He took on the destruction of this world, letting the dominance and oppression of the Roman Empire and the religious power of that day do their worst to him. In this, God in Christ took all of that sin, our sin, all sin, to the cross with him, onto that cross where it was nailed there with him as he died for us and for our salvation. This was not because God needed us, but because God loves us.

The God who created us, also gave us a share of God's own character with the ability to love and the ability to choose how we share that love. So, when we still fail to apply that love to God and one another, God in sovereign authority over us chose to make covenants with us and ultimately, chose to fulfill those covenants for us. God seems willing to do whatever it takes to make things right and spare humanity, to save us, and save all of creation.

That is what the cross represents for us and it is what we will look at as we head toward Easter Sunday in this season of Lent. We will see a continuance of God's devotion to humanity and to all of creation in God's commitment to us to share with us God's characteristics. Indeed, God gives us love, sovereignty and community, all key elements of the triune God who is One, and

yet three distinct persons in community, bound by love, and sovereign over all that is created by this love. God does not need us to have community, but chose to create us to share in God's own community, to share that love that is so freely given to us.

One of the things I find interesting about the Noah story is that when God sees all this wickedness and is contemplating just scrapping it all and starting over, God looks down and sees Noah. Noah didn't call out to God to ask that the world be spared. No, God just looked down and saw that it was worth saving. This was not because Noah was perfect, but because God is faithful to the promises made. God had promised Adam in the story of the garden that all would be made right – that the serpent's head would be crushed. God's promises last.

God also does answer our calls, because that's how we see God responding to the people of Israel in slavery in Egypt, to the exiles in Babylon and the people who still felt as though they were in exile at the time of Jesus. We give our hearts to God when we call out, knowing that God will be faithful to God's promises because we have seen God faithful to the promises.

In the call to confession, I made reference to Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he says that our hope in the cross is not something to make us ashamed, but it is something by which God gives the Holy Spirit to us to pour love into our hearts. This is not done based on what we have done to earn this, but it is based on what God has promised to us.

God is faithful to us even in our most difficult struggles, even when we are sinners. It is precisely because we are sinners that God comes to us and calls us always to lift up our souls, to present our entire being to God, in response to the love that God pursues us with each and every day.

We confuse dominion with dominance and still God loves us. We confuse creation with the accumulation of things, and still God loves us. Friends, we give thanks to God who is good and whose faithfulness endures forever because we see this faithfulness always. Even in the flood, Noah trusted God. And when God shared in our humanity, God went out into the wilderness, on the margins, to be tested, and unlike us, Jesus persevered through those tests. Jesus is like us in all things but sin, and at the same time is our Lord and God.

In this difficult time, when we see our sisters and brothers struggling in Texas under the weight of bizarre weather and human mistakes, we must remember that God is with us even in that. The ultimate promise of our God is to be with us now, and to be with us in eternity, to restore all things and make all things new to dwell with us forever. We see the faithfulness of God throughout time and throughout our lives, and we trust in that.

When we face trouble, we can look upon the Lord who is faithful even when we are not. When we see the difficulty around us, we need not see it as a burden, but as an opportunity to be the hands and feet of God for others. Let us be a sign of God's love and presence to others. Let us love one another as Jesus loved us.

In a reading we didn't read today from 1 Peter in the lectionary, we see the people of God asking a question of Peter. They want to know why, if they are following Christ, then why do they still suffer? Why is there death? Why are they persecuted? Peter points out that God wishes for none

to be lost, so much so that Christ ministered to the souls in prison to bring even them to a knowledge of God's faithfulness. It's a strange verse that makes it into the Apostle's Creed, but it is an interesting notion of the depths to which God is faithful to us. Not only did God become one of us in Christ, but also Peter shows us there is no depth to which God will not go to be faithful to us.

Our calling is to respond to that love and faithfulness of God, in order that others might see this in us, so that they might also know God's love and with us, join in God's work to reconcile all things in Christ. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

Mark 1:9-15 (Pastor's Translation) And it came to *pass* in those days that *Jesus of Nazareth, Galilee* came and was *baptized* in the *Jordan* by John. And *immediately*, going up from out of the *water*, he saw the heavens *ripped* apart, and the *Spirit*, as a *dove, descending* upon him. And a *voice* came from out of the *heavens*, 'You are my *Son*, the *beloved*, in you I am well *pleased*.' Immediately, the Spirit *threw* him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness *forty days*, being *tempted* by *Satan*. He was with the *wild* animals and the *angels* were *ministering* to 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."