

A Repentant God

Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15

March 1, 2009

Perhaps you'll not find this as interesting as I did, but here it is. The word "Lent" is not a Hebrew or Greek word. That is to say, it is not a biblical word. You won't find the word in the bible. It is actually a derivation for the Saxon name for the month of March, "Lencten-Monath," rightly translated as that time of year when the days are beginning to be longer than the nights.¹

The church year's season of lent began on Wednesday of this past week and today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a forty-day time period preceding Easter. It's forty days long to symbolize the forty days Jesus spent out in the wilderness fasting and being tempted. Sundays are not counted as Lenten days. That's why when referring to Sundays we give them the title of Sundays "in" Lent – inside the season of Lent.

This season calls for such a radical change in our behavior that spectacular parties of excess usher it in. The Tuesday before Ash Wednesday is the day most often associated with these parties of excess. Pancake suppers - the Mardi Gras in New Orleans - are events that are meant to help participants prepare for the refocusing this season of preparation expects of us. Preparing to prepare – that's what the festivities of Shrove Tuesday are supposed to be about.

There was a time when the season of Lent was primarily about preparing new converts to the faith for their baptism at the Easter vigil service on the eve of the great day of resurrection. Later it became a time of reconciling or reconnecting back into the fellowship - through an emphasis on penitence and forgiveness - those who had done wrong and been thrown out of the fellowship. In our day the season is a time when all of us more intentionally take a look at our lives and our walk with God and come clean about how and where it's not all it could be. The purpose being to prepare us, the communities of faith we are on the journey of faith with, and all of creation for the good news of Easter morning. It's a time for us to admit our need for a savior – a time for us to admit that we are unable to walk the path of faith, the journey through life, on our own.

Rev. John Roberts provides an interesting and I think helpful way of understanding the role of this season in a piece he entitled "Remembering & Forgetting." He wrote: "When I was a boy, I was told, 'Baptists don't do Lent.' No one knew why. I suspect that it was an anti-Catholic thing which I pray we are over. It was the old argument, 'whatever they do, we don't!' – a curiously convoluted, twisted and unhealthy way to decide on religious practices," he noted.

"Whatever the reason for 'not doing Lent,' I think it is a great loss for any Christian not to prepare for Good Friday and Easter. Every spring baseball players prepare for the season with spring training; every spring ordinary people prepare for the summer by doing 'spring cleaning.' So why shouldn't Christians prepare for the most important events in Jesus' ministry – what he did for us on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, what he did for us on Golgotha's cross and at the empty tomb?"

"If it helps you, think of Lent as a kind of Christian spring training and spring cleaning."²

I don't know about you, but I'm really ready for nature's spring this year. I'm ready to watch or maybe even play some baseball or softball or to do some spring cleaning or just to see an end to the snow and more days like a couple of the ones we enjoyed last week. But, I want to invite us this morning to consider preparing ourselves for the spiritual season of spring also. I want to invite us to get out our spiritual bats and gloves, our spiritual

rag and dust mops and start preparing ourselves for the season ahead – the season of hope and joy – Easter – the spiritual spring that parallels nature’s spring. I invite you to take some time following the service today to go into the parlor where you will find a table with several possible spiritual disciplines you might want to try this year.

Some of you have been in my office. You know the menagerie of Noah’s ark pieces I have displayed. I really do like the collection that people have given me over the years. None is quite so precious to me as the one Dorothy gave me for Father’s Day or Valentine’s Day one year. It occupies the space on the floor closest to me. It’s this rug or wall hanging.

Despite some of the really beautiful artwork used to emphasize the picturesque, meant to be uplifting ending of the story, the rest of the account isn’t really all that pretty. I mean it’s filled with violence and destruction, the scope of which we can only imagine. We’re in love with what I refer to as the “zoo” part of the story – a sort of romanticized unrealistic version. Until we get to the dove, rainbow and covenant by God parts, this is an ugly story. God being angry, buckets of rain falling from the sky for forty days and nights, people and animals drowning, and how about in the bottom of that ark – where all those animals ate, slept and well, ... it had to have gotten a little ripe by the end. Despite how much we try to pass it off as a wonderful story for children, it’s not a children’s story. We have to clean it up a lot to make it so.

The story of Noah and the Ark may be one of the best known stories in literature. Those of us with a few years on us are familiar with the way comedian preacher Bill Cosby retold it several years ago: Cosby has Noah working around the house, down in his rec room, doing a little remodeling: “Voobah, voobah, voobah ... when a voice is heard,

‘NOAH!’

‘Somebody call?’ Voobah, voobah, voobah.

‘NOAH!’

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s the Lord, Noah.

‘RIGHT...What do you want? I been good.

‘Noah, I want you to build an ark – go out and gather up every species of animal, two by two, male and female, and bring them into the ark, because I’m going to destroy the world.

‘RIGHT...who is this really? Am I on Candid Camera?’”³ And on and on it goes - a really fun piece.

There’s another modern version that has made its way around on the internet a few times: In this version the Lord spoke to Noah and said, “Noah, in six months I’m going to make it rain until the whole world is covered with water. But I want to save a few good people and two of every living thing on the planet. So I am ordering you to build an Ark.’

“‘OK,’ Noah said, trembling with fear. ‘I’m your man.’ Six months passed, the sky began to cloud up, and the rain began to fall in torrents. The Lord looked down and saw Noah sitting in his yard. There was no Ark.

“‘Noah!’ shouted the Lord, ‘where is my Ark?’

“‘Lord, please forgive me!’ begged Noah. ‘I did my best, but there were some big problems. First, I had to get a building permit. My neighbors objected, claiming that I was violating zoning ordinances by building the Ark in my front yard. I spent months trying to get a variance from the city planning board. After all that, I had a big problem getting enough wood for the ark, because of the endangered species act.’

“‘Then the carpenters’ union started picketing my home because I wasn’t using union carpenters. Next, I started gathering up the animals but got sued by an animal rights group. Just when that suit got dismissed, the EPA notified me that I couldn’t complete the Ark without filing an environmental impact statement for your proposed flood. Then the Corps of Engineers wanted a map of the area to be flooded. I sent them a globe and they went ballistic! Lord, I’m sorry, but I don’t think there’s any way I can finish the Ark in less than five years if ever!’

“‘With that, the sky cleared, the sun began to shine, and a rainbow arched across the sky. Noah looked up and smiled. ‘You mean you are not going to destroy the world?’ he asked hopefully.

“‘Wrong!’ thundered the Lord. ‘But I’m going to do it with something far worse than a mere flood. Something far more destructive. Something that man himself created.’

“‘What’s that?’ Noah asked.

“‘Government!’ said the Lord.”⁴

The part of the story that really hooks us is that reference to a rainbow. I mean, who doesn’t love or enjoy a rainbow? Who can help appreciate the wonder that multi-colored banner causes as it stretches across the skyline? Who can help marveling at what nature offers when some water droplets suspended in the sky and the sun mix it up? The colors are always in the same order: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Did you know that rainbows are actually circular? We only see half of every rainbow. That’s why we are never able to find the pot of gold at the end of them. Rainbows really have no end.⁵

Rainbows lift our spirits. They lift our spirits because they follow storms. It doesn’t really matter how fierce a storm is if it is followed by a rainbow we smile – our souls feel hopeful.

Rainbows also remind us of the beauty that is God’s world – that despite some of the ugly things that happen to us – that despite some of the ugly things we’ve done to God’s world – there’s still something pretty awesome about this thing we call nature.

But the theological thing rainbows do for us is they remind us that God has a pact with us⁶ – a covenant with us – that God loves us despite all the ugliness we create in nature and in our own lives. The story of Noah and the Ark is a story that is meant to birth within our spirits a sense of relief – it is meant to describe God’s commitment to us – to be our God and no matter what not to destroy us – not to deal with us vengefully – not to take it out on us when we go astray.

For me, this means that all the talk from some religious circles that the evil that happens in our world is the result of human sin is mistaken – it misreads the word of God – the activity of God in the world. I know this might stretch some of our views about God a bit, but I think this story suggests to us that God regretted the decision to handle humanity’s sinfulness by destroying us – by causing pain and suffering. There’s no question that some of the things we do cause some of the pain and suffering we experience in life, but I think it’s way overdone. All pain and suffering is not a result of God’s weighing in on what we do or say. It’s not a description of where God is and what God is doing. I would like to suggest to you that God is the one putting the rainbow in the sky when after disaster has caused havoc in our world – the one opening our heart to new possibilities – healing us of the guilt borne out of our sinfulness – offering second chances.

I would suggest to you this morning that it is a repentant God who creates within those without a job a belief that work will come again. It is a repentant God who births within those who have lost a loved one the courage to risk reaching out to others in hopes of establishing new friendships or relationships. It is a repentant God who resurrects hope in those who feel laden down with the pressures of life. It is a repentant God who offers forgiveness when we have been dishonest, greedy, gossipy, ungrateful.

Lent is a time for us to practice what God has modeled for us – that repentance is good for the soul – good for us – an appropriate approach to life. I invite us to take seriously the example God has provided and do what is good for the soul this Lenten season – repent. After all, if it is something God found it necessary to do, than surely it’s necessary for us as well. If it was good enough for God, surely it’s good enough for us also.

1. Larry D. Powell, “The Technicolor Sign,” On His Way (Lima: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1984), 0-89536-681-9.
2. Rev. John Roberts, “Remembering & Forgetting,”
3. Bill Cosby,
4. Saul Rapkin, The Jewish Humor List (jhumor@lgk.com). (Adapted)
5. Michael Guillen, PhD, Can a Smart Person Believe In God? (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004).
6. King Duncan, “Rainbows and Roses,” Dynamic Preaching First Quarter Sermons 2009 (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2009), 0-000-0000-20.