

Lent 1

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

Lent - is what is sometimes called a penitential season - not the sort of phrase you will hear used anywhere outside of a church. but to what end? For something, not self indulgent self absorption; context is preparation for greater love, faithfulness. Preparation for even more and greater Good News

Lent challenges our perfunctory faith that merely goes through the motions of church — play-acting, if you will. Lent isn't just a minor tune-up or slight readjustment of life. It doesn't just tinker around the edges or offer a cosmetic makeover. Rather, Lent calls us to resurrection from the dead through repentance, to the weird faith.

Reading from Hebrew Scriptures This is an ancient and complex story, far more rich than the simple children's story of a kindly old man who loves pairing up animals and has a quirk for boat building. A myth the like of which appears in many of the mythologies of ancient cultures. Myths from ancient cultures that are still around today are around today because they contain some core of truth that is recognised. People don't continue to tell the same story for thousands of years unless it contains some core element of truth that people value and judge to be too precious to be lost. Literalists miss this, whether they be secular to religious literalists.

The story of the flood. Here is God presented as participating in the never ending cycle of violence that has already begun to emerge upon the face of the earth with the first couple and the serpent and the blame shifting of who ate of the fruit and then Cain and Abel and the rapidly spiralling out of control story of humanity's prosperity for violence and evil is well established, "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:11). Flood, wipe out the violence with violence. Here is God presented as participating in the never ending cycle of violence that has already begun to emerge upon the face of the earth with the first couple and the serpent and the blame shifting of who ate of the fruit and then Cain and Abel and the rapidly spiralling out of control story of humanity's prosperity for violence and evil is well established, "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:11). Flood, wipe out the violence with violence.

And today we pick up the story after the ark containing Noah and his family and all those pairs of animals has bobbed around on the waters for several weeks. And now the human and animal sailors have emerged to the scene of destruction. God looks upon the devastation, "Oh my God, never again". Well, that was God's reaction anyway. We know because God hung a rainbow in the sky.

Nowadays rainbows are becoming increasingly popular things. They have taken on the symbolism of inclusivity and peace. Which is all fitting.

But for the author of our story the rainbow is not just a colourful symbol of a happy new start, but the bow is literally that – a bow. Not the one you tie in your shoelaces or on a birthday present, but the one a warrior shoots arrows with. The warrior, being God, has repented of the ways of violence and destruction and hung the

symbol of violence up permanently in the sky. God, given very human emotions by the author of Genesis and being shattered at the extent and violence of this flood chooses to unilaterally disarm and instead makes covenant, not just with humans, but with the whole creation, saying, never again. Very important point - first covenant not with humans, not Jewish nation, but whole creation. This story sets salvation history within larger context of time, space, creation. Never again will the Creator God make war upon humanity, even though even this fresh and hopeful new start that emerges from the floodwaters is destined for disappointment. Never again will God turn against us humans despite the evil and rebellion of God's created beings. There must be another way to carry on this necessary confrontation with the intruder evil that God is determined to eradicate. And so covenant is made, a binding together of two parties and it is established between God and not just the human part of creation but with the whole the created order. We will be hearing of more covenants in the coming weeks through Lent. You could put up an argument that if you were looking for a single theme in scripture is is Covenant.

On this first Sunday of Lent our lectionary pairs the post flood covenant with another reading from the gospel of Mark that is also rich and challenging. Challenging for us, but even more challenging for God, for a God that has not, and never will, abandon the struggle against evil, but has declared never again will I make violent warfare, or use natural destruction upon my creation to bring about the good that God craves. How then is the struggle to be taken up, what are the weapons of battle for a warrior who has abandoned and hung in the heavens the weapons and instead covenanted in peace and mercy.

Mark's account of Jesus' wilderness retreat simply says Jesus 'was with the wild beasts, and angels ministered to him.' We can draw both comfort and challenge from that, because we all face times when the beasts of life are all too real, when faith falters, when despair gnaws at us, and hopelessness nearly destroys our sense of well being.

I wonder what wild beasts were with Jesus? Pride, perhaps, or self-doubt? Fear, both of his own potential and of the road ahead? Lack of trust in God? Mark doesn't tell us, but we can imagine since in our own lives, choosing good paths, right paths, paths which lead us closer to God, is a sure and certain way to be catapulted into the wilderness. And the accusations and the wild beasts that we find there are all familiar to the Human One.

Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness - we pray that the Spirit will tease out, stir, support, guide, direct....not drive us anywhere

Like Jesus, we cannot do it alone. We do not have the ability to talk down the Accuser, Satan; we do not have the power to tackle the wild beasts. The wilderness can be a terrible place, arid and lonely, overwhelming and painful. But Mark tells us that God continued to care for Jesus, even in the wilderness, even in that time of anguish and doubt: for God sent angels to minister to him.

And so, if our Lenten journeys are in imitation of Christ, then we can expect angels. They won't be chubby little cherubs available at the local gift shop. They will probably look a bit scruffy, and turn up at a time when we are struggling most and least able to

welcome them. Perhaps we will encounter a messenger from God in a timely telephone call from an old friend, or in a chat with a stranger at a bus stop, or in the wise words of a six year old. Perhaps we will hear them through the words of a book, or a prayer, or a poem. Perhaps we will recognise them in a pot of soup, or a kindness on a rough day, or in some other small act of ministry.

But have no doubt. In the wilderness, in the whirlwind of convincing lies about who we are and what we are called to be, in the midst of the demons of arrogance and lust and anger and gossip and violence, angels will minister to us.

Wild beasts snap at our heels, and angels clean our wounds. This Lenten path is strange and difficult, and it leads of course to the cross. But this we know: it will be at the point when we imitate Christ, when we finally give up and hand control over to God, when we allow that which we hold so precious about ourselves to be crucified, that the wild beasts will put their tails between their legs and slink away.