

1st Sunday in Lent – February 18, 2024
Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15, 1 Peter 3:18-22

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

What are you giving up for Lent this year? I've gone back and forth on that over the years. Sometimes I think it can be a helpful practice, something concrete to tie me to the discipline of Lenten observance, and at other times I think it can be a distraction, a token act that actually keeps me from being serious about the season. So you could probably convince me of either approach. But this is not really what I want to talk to you about this morning. It's just a way of getting at two important emphases in our readings this week. You see, what I'm really interested in is not what we might give up for Lent, in but what God gives up, and also what God doesn't give up. And not just for Lent, for good.

Today's first reading comes from the end of the Noah story. If you read the introductory As We Gather blurb at the front of your bulletin, you know that our first readings during Lent this year are focused on the covenants in the Old Testament that God made with God's people, and the Noah story is the first of these. But the Noah covenant is not like the others. It doesn't go as far as they do in establishing a relationship between God and God's people. That happens in the covenant with Abraham that we'll get in next week's reading. Noah is really part of the pre-history to the Abraham story, and so the covenant with Noah is really a pre-covenant. It is not yet a promise to bless. It is only, like famous clause of the Hippocratic oath, a promise to do no harm. What God promises here is to never again try to kill everybody as he did with the flood. This is what God gives up. God hangs up God's bow, that terrible weapon of war that is the ancestor of the gun and the missile. God hangs up the bow as a reminder, both to the people of the earth and also to God, of what God has given up. God is making a move here away from fighting evil with curses and destruction. That has not worked. Even saving the best of humankind in Noah and his family only gets things back to where they started. Sin, death, and evil, are still loose in the world. Another kind of solution is necessary.

This understanding of God can be hard for us to get our heads around because we have become accustomed to thinking of God as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and infallible. That way of thinking does not leave room for a God who changes God's mind. But somehow, at the same time, we have not given up on the idea of a God who will take down the bow from time to time and send an arrow into our lives. And so, when bad things happen, we conclude that God must be sending misfortune on us, and is doing so for a good reason. "Everything happens for a reason," we say.

I have a friend out west who was diagnosed last year with metastatic lung cancer that first showed up in the bones of her leg. This friend is also a Lutheran pastor, and an astute theologian. In her latest blog post she takes on the "everything happens for a reason" mantra, calling it a stale platitude. Some things happen for a reason, she writes. The reason she lost her hair is because that's what chemotherapy often does. A doctor could explain exactly how that works. But knowing the reason for something is not an antidote to pain and loss. In fact, it's a way of telling us that we have no right to complain, or to grieve. Because when your misfortune is part of God's plan, well, who are you to argue? Who are you to be sad or angry?

The picture of God in the Bible doesn't fit this modern take very well. Have a look at the psalms of lament, which are full of complaint against God. Have a look at Abraham, who bargains with God to try and save Sodom and Gomorrah, though without success. Then have a look at Exodus 32 where Moses *does* talk God out of destroying the people of Israel after the

golden calf episode. And don't forget my favorite example of the people of Nineveh repenting in the book of Jonah and God changing God's mind, or Jacob wrestling with God to extract a blessing. And succeeding! And God changes his name to Israel, so that henceforth God's chosen people will be known by a name that means that they wrestle with God.

The point of my friend's blog post was the inestimable value of being accompanied in the midst of pain and loss by those who love us, those who are with us not only when we are at our best, but also when we are at our absolute worst. And that is just what is happening in today's Gospel reading. We've had part of this reading twice already since Advent, the part about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. Here is Jesus, the Son of God – we know he's the Son of God because Mark says so in the very first sentence of the Gospel, which might actually be its title: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" – here is the Son of God joining us in the messy reality of our earthly lives, beset by sin, death, and evil, undergoing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is not something Jesus himself needed. He did not need repentance or forgiveness. But he nevertheless joins us in our nature and our lot, as one of our ancient eucharistic prayers puts it, and immediately after his baptism he is thrust into the painful reality of our existence; the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. We don't know the details of that testing in Mark. It gets fleshed out in Matthew's and Luke's later accounts. Nothing is said here either of fasting. It doesn't say that he went without food and water. It says instead that the angels served him. The testing in Mark is about whom Jesus will trust as he inhabits the difficulties of our reality that he is joining us in, and the clear implication is that, like the people of Israel in their wilderness journey, he depended upon the help that God sent instead of succumbing the temptations of Satan. One more detail of Mark's version, missing in Matthew and Luke. Mark says that Jesus was with the wild beasts. Jesus has come through the water and is with the wild beasts. I don't know for sure that Mark had Noah in mind here, but our lectionary compilers, I think, have seen the connection. Jesus in Mark is a new Noah, only this time he's getting it right.

The last thing I want us to notice in today's readings is what God does *not* give up. God does not give up on all those people who perished in the flood of the Noah story. In the Apostle's creed we confess that after his crucifixion and burial, and before his resurrection, Jesus "descended to the dead." This reading from 1 Peter is where the creed gets that from. Even Hell is not safe from the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings. That's why in Matthew Jesus says that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church that is founded on the rock of faith. God will not force us into the Kingdom, but neither will God stop trying to win us over, even when we suppose that it is too late. Even when we give up on God, God in Jesus Christ does not give up on us.

So what will you give up for Lent? Whatever Lenten practice you have decided on – or maybe you're still deciding, it's not too late to start – whatever else you might consider giving up for Lent, you are invited to give up what God gives up, to give up on returning evil for evil, to give up cursing those who curse you, to give up your reliance on the ways of this world that draw you from God. And at the same time you are invited to not give up on those the world has given up on, to remember the poor, and those without family and friends to care for them, those who have endured terrible loss and misfortune. Wrestle with God this Lent in the midst of all that is wrong in the world and in your own life, assured that God is with you in Jesus Christ through whatever is yet to come, who has joined you in the suffering of this life in order to bring you to God. Rejoice in the God who will not give up on you. And peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

