

Sermon: Lent I

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 22, 2015

Year B
Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

When I was in high school... I learned to work on a potter's wheel... sometimes... if I hadn't prepared the clay well... or if it wasn't properly centered on the wheel... it could be almost impossible to work with... but I couldn't always tell that at first... I had to lean over the wheel and work with the clay... wetting my hands... applying gentle pressure to center the clay... work with it to yield to my hands... creating a depression whose sides would curve up into what would become a bowl... or a vase... but sometimes... there'd be a lump in the clay which... could not be smoothed out... which I had not worked out before balling the clay up and throwing it on the wheel... and the clay would not yield... or it would get too wobbly... and I'd have to stop... and scrape it off the wheel... and start all over again...

I had never read the prophet Jeremiah... but I experienced vaguely... what God said through him... in Jeremiah 18: God said to Jeremiah... *"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words."* So Jeremiah went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel... the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in his hand... so he reworked it into another vessel... Then God said to Jeremiah... *Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you... in my hand. At one moment... I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom... that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it... but if that nation... turns from its evil... I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.*

And God instructed Jeremiah... *Now, therefore, say to the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil ways, and amend your ways and your doings...*

Composed of Jacob's sons and grandsons... the Twelve Tribes of Israel were formed at about 2,000 BC... and these people... who would have identified with the idea of city-gods bound to particular cities... would also have *practiced* sacrifice... to appease their gods and avoid their wrath... But in the seventh century BC... when Deuteronomy was written... there was a theological insight among the Jewish people... that there was One God... it was at this time too that the Shema was written... *Hear O Israel... the Lord our God... the Lord is One...*

Jeremiah lived and wrote in the years just before the Babylonian Exile... which happened in 586 BC... his words foretold that event... The prophet Ezekiel... who wrote *during* the Exile... wrote about YHWH leaving the Holy of Holies within the Temple... to go and be with God's people in Exile...

And the most important parts of the book of Genesis... were written during the Babylonian Exile too... And this one significant theological insight that emerged... was that there was only One God... who reigned over the Twelve Tribes and all other tribes... and who could unite all of them into One... it was then... that the story of Noah... and the flood... and the covenant... was written down...

The ancient world carried a keen... and fearful sense of God's omnipotence and justice... but as this emerging theological insight of One God took hold... there was another... even more dramatic revelation that began to emerge too...

Theologian Wm. Lloyd Allen reminds us that although humanity had trespassed across the boundaries established in the beginning... although violence increasingly corrupted

God's good creation... although the celestial "sons of God" transgressed the boundary between heaven and earth... and had children with the daughters of men... and although violence polluted the earth itself... and the whole thing needed to be cleaned up... God provided Noah and his family... provided humanity... with a Plan B... and sealed it with a covenant... and there was a corresponding sign that could be seen in the heavens... now the ancients believed lightning to be the arrows of the gods... and so God's promise to put a bow in the clouds... a rainbow pointing *away from* the earth... would be a reminder to God to never again destroy all flesh on the earth...

But what does happen... what is more remarkable than the brilliant Hebrew realization that there is only One God... is that the covenant between God and all flesh... imposes limits... self-imposed limits... on God alone... what's fascinating... is that in this covenant... in this legal agreement *as it were*... Noah never says a word... And there's no real expectation that the covenant would restore God's intended balance... that wasn't the point... because even after it... humanity continued to pursue evil... pollute the earth... and the strong continued to overpower the weak...

The Rev. Dr. David Lose... President of Lutheran Theological Seminary wrote: In making this covenant... God binds God's own self to humanity... and indeed to all the world... in a new and different way... God is no longer only the creator... God is now also the protector... committed to refrain from punishing humanity or destroying the world... and by binding God's self to humanity's fate... God becomes invested in it... and is... in this way... keenly vulnerable... even exposed... God cannot simply sit back oblivious to what happens... much as the Greek or Roman gods might... because now God's fortunes are bound up with ours... and God is invested in God's own creation...

Allen continues... this covenant also reveals the unity of all creation... the intractable sinfulness... and undeserved blessedness... of humanity... and all of creation's total dependence upon God's active compassion... Creation including humanity... is One... What affects part... affects all...

This God who brought order out of chaos... creation out of nothing... this God... whose will to create and destroy... is beyond our understanding... this God... commits to favor relationship... over omnipotence... this God who is without limits... chooses limits... and this is the beginning... of our initially dim recognition... of God's self-emptying love... and it foreshadows God's incarnation into... and sharing in... the suffering and death of humankind... for while we were still sinners... Jesus continued this covenant and died to death... that we might have immortal life...

In today's Gospel... after his baptism... Jesus enters the wilderness for forty days... like the forty days of the flood... of the chaos that water represented... and he was tempted by the same evil forces to which those before the flood succumbed...

In our forty-day Lenten journey... we have an opportunity to face our own temptations... and to transcend centuries-old... and modern... tribal divisions... of far too many kinds... in our forty-day Lenten journey... we have a chance to reject those who turn God's diversity into *us and them... right and wrong... good and bad...* in our forty-day Lenten journey... we have the choice of whether we hold an entire people... responsible for the actions of a few...

The challenge is to remain human... and the God of this covenant is unchanging only in refusing to give up on us... God keeps the future open by self-limitation... when we threaten to close off hope by unlimited... repeat offenses... God takes this risk... because God's heart is touched by creation's suffering... the God declaring this covenant... is a lover grieved to the heart at the beloved's violence... Those who look... will find divine regret... but will look in vain for anger...

This is the relationship... that carries us from sin into glory... this is the promise... that rejects works righteousness... and this is the grace... that gives us hope.

Mike+