

Lent 1 / B

The Wilderness and the Promise

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

21 February 2021



On Wednesday – Ash Wednesday - we entered once more into the 40-day-long, somber, penitential season of Lent. Which seems like a strange thing to say since, in many ways, it feels like we've been stuck in one year-long, never-ending season of Lent since last March. As a clergy colleague asked me this past week: "Just what does one give up when it feels like we've given up everything already, including family, and friends, and church?" Good question!

On this first Sunday of the Lenten season, the texts thrust us, like Jesus at his baptism, quite suddenly into the wilderness.

To start, we heard the story of God's promise to Noah after the Great Flood. This is a beautiful passage of hope and promise, and every church nursery in every church I have served has had a mural, or painting, or, in Messiah's case, curtains, with the animals lining up two by two to board the ark. But in the context of the somber season of Lent, one cannot read the Flood story without the specter of diluvial destruction hanging over the passage. And speaking of specters, how about the epistle reading for today? We have Jesus preaching to spirits imprisoned since Noah's day — a statement no one is quite sure how to explain. And of course, from Mark's Gospel, we have the baptism of Jesus with the sky torn open, a heavenly voice, and then the Spirit immediately driving him out into the wilderness, alone for forty days, tempted and tested by Satan.

With these three stories before us, where do we even begin?

The story of Noah and the great flood has many eyebrow-raising elements, not the least of which is a genocidal God. Whether or not the story is entirely a metaphor or has ancient, historical roots, the fact remains that the story includes a whole lot of people who are seemingly killed by a vengeful and petulant God. Perhaps it is an anachronistic sensibility, but from our position in the 21st century, it seems highly unlikely that every single human would have done something deserving of death, save for the eight members of one pious family. In today's reading, we see Noah's covenant with God at the end of the saga, that God has set the rainbow in the heavens as an eternal promise that God will never again flood the entire earth. But that still doesn't answer the question of why God would have killed all those people. How are we to make sense of this bit of hopeful promise at the closing, without acknowledging and understanding the rest of the story?

So, we turn to the New Testament, hoping for some guidance and enlightenment. But, in the reading from the First Letter of Peter, there is little clarity gained. Instead, there is a somewhat mystifying reference to Jesus preaching to spirits who have been in prison from Noah's day. As the author writes: Jesus "went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water." The scholars and biblical commentaries are not extremely helpful in providing additional transparency or understanding.

There are three main schools of thought when it comes to whom these spirits Jesus is preaching to may be.

- The first theory is that Jesus descended to the underworld to preach to the souls of those who died in the flood. This would imply that there were souls stuck in a kind of limbo, awaiting the birth and death of Jesus.
- A second thought is that Jesus preached to Noah's contemporaries through Noah himself. The thinking goes that the Holy Spirit filled Noah and used him to preach Jesus' message to his living contemporaries. Of course, their deaths imply that not one person believed him.

- Still others speculate that the spirits in prison are fallen angels associated with the wickedness and sin that ran rampant throughout the whole world before the Great Flood.

The reading from First Peter only adds to our confusion. Fortunately, we still have Mark's Gospel to turn to. The text for the day begins with Jesus being baptized by John, the heavens torn apart, and a voice from heaven proclaiming, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In Marks' account, we have a baptism account that is fairly straightforward. "You are my Son, the Beloved." It's a passage about identity. It's a passage that showcases what theologians call "ontology," or Jesus' nature of being. Set as the opening of his Gospel, this is where Mark starts his story of Jesus. Before the temptation in the wilderness, before any calling of disciples, before any healings, miracles, or preaching, Mark starts with this proclamation of identity: Jesus is the Son of God, the Beloved.

With this, we can begin to look backward at the other texts. We see the First Peter passage in a new light. Whichever way we choose to identify the mysterious "spirits in prison," the primary purpose of this passage is to point to Christ's identity. Jesus is the one who suffered. And Jesus is the one who has triumphed and now sits at the right hand of God. So, what does this mean for baptism?

It is interesting that the author of the epistle chooses to bring in the story of Noah and the Flood as a prefiguring, a first look at baptism. It is a look backward. The Flood was a disaster – whether it should be read as a literary metaphor, or was based on a true event – either way, the Great Flood was a devastating tragedy. Similarly, baptism is also a look backward. Within the joy and the promise of the sacrament, there is also an acknowledgment of suffering, devastation, and even death. It is a look backward at the wilderness we have come from, not just individually, but collectively, as well. As humanity, as a culture, as a religion, we have come from a truly wild place. We have suffered, and we have caused suffering.

While the analogy of the Flood is a look backward, it is also a look forward to hope. There is a fundamental shift in humanity after the Flood. There is an ontological change, a change in identity. Beginning with Noah's family, all of humanity is now comprised of people who have been saved. These are people who are beloved. No matter who they are or where they go from

there, the fundamental part of their identity remains that they are people who have been rescued, have been saved from death. Full stop.

Baptism, according to the author of the epistle, is not a “removal of dirt from the body.” No, it is a sign of a change of identity. It is a sign that we are rescued, cleansed, and made new. We are the Beloved. We may not understand the suffering that has occurred before us, or even in our own time. We may never know the why behind the Great Flood, or the who of the spirits in prison. But whichever way we read these passages, there are two points that come across as clear as day: Christ is with us. And Christ is for us.

The fundamental message from our text today is summed up in the collect: “Let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.” Jesus is mighty to save. And taking that one step further, Jesus is mighty to save each and every one of us. Jesus is mighty to save *me*. Jesus is mighty to save *you*. Jesus is mighty to save *each and every one of us, all of humanity*. As the psalmist writes, God is “the God of my salvation.” The God who is God of the waters and the mighty floods descended into the depths and fullness of human suffering for us. Now, through the baptismal waters, we find our identity in Christ. No matter the pain we have experienced in the past, no matter the pain we are experiencing now, or will experience in the future. No matter what desolate wilderness we may experience, Christ has been there, Christ is there, Christ will be there.

And thus, as we enter into this season of Lent, we see once more the wilderness all around us. We know the wilderness we’ve come from. And we know there’s still wilderness yet to come. But through it all, we hold onto our identity in Christ. The identity of God’s beloved that ever reminds us: Christ is with you. Christ is for you.

Amen.