

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Sermon 2.18.24

**Genesis 9:8-17**

Then [after the flood, when the ark rested on dry land again] God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

**Mark 1:9-15**

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (392)

It's easier to ruin than to repair. I throw socks away on this principle all the time. A toe pops out, a heel rubs the sock thin, and the sock ends up in the garbage, but always with this thought: Time was this would have been darned. Now, I just give up on it.

You too?

There are many things about the story of the flood that are problematic. That God would give up, so quickly, so soon. That God would prefer catastrophe, destruction, and all attending suffering; would prefer that over tinkering and tolerance and inching toward perfection, redemption.

Someone recently told me that that the greenest building is the one already standing, that nothing new we could build would do better in terms of environmental impact than the building already standing. Just retrofit it for better efficiency. Why bring to waste what can be refit for better use?

But the temptation to build anew, to scrap what has been, to give up and then to start fresh: it's a strong temptation.

Lots of problems here.

It's funny, then, that the story of Noah and his ark and the great flood has turned into a children's story—because the destruction imagined is so thoroughgoing and the cause of it, God's condemnation of all he'd made, is upsetting to consider. Maybe it's thought this would all be lost on children, they'd be too distracted by the cute animals or their minds are too small to consider something so grand and terrible. Or maybe it's thought they'd imagine themselves on the ark, rather than under it.

Not that we'd like foster such impulses in our children. The world really doesn't need people hardened to the suffering of others, grateful that at least we're safe, at least *I'm* safe.

"There but for the grace of God go I," we say when we're safe, but we see someone else just barely treading water. Why is that heard as a piety? It sounds more like every-man-for-himself, but dressed up in theological vestments, like not only do I have goodies in life, but I also have the grace of God. Double-win for me!

I don't know. Maybe I'm hearing that wrong.

The point of the story of Noah and his ark, I imagine anyway, if an ancient story like this can be reduced to "having a point," which it really can't and it is *ancient* and it is common across many cultures yet here I go: the point of this story, I imagine anyway, or one possible effect, is to move people past their wrong conclusions about God, to move them toward an understanding of God that will be more sustaining, not to mention more true, and which will have more of an eye for the future rather than for the irretrievable past, that God isn't about giving up but about persistence, presence, faithfulness, that God isn't about ruin, is rather about repair.

We've assumed God as ruinous, and likely because there is so much powerful ruin all around us and even within us. It's not just socks we give up on. It's relationships, it's politics, it's ourselves. We give up on a lot of things.

What's more, the creation itself is ruinous. The cruelty of the creation—the profligate waste of evolution. This theory was scandalous not simply because it seemed not to include God in the act of creating but moreover because it seemed to include waste and death as an essential part of it all, a blithe embrace of false starts and dead ends and deadly becoming while offing the "unfit." Think of all those just-hatched iguanas made to reach their mothers by way of a trek across a beach filled with snakes, racer snakes they're called. Think of baby elephants getting separated from their clans in dust storms. Think of viruses. Dodos. Evolutionary dead ends. The profligacy! This created order just doesn't add up—which, frankly, is one reason why the theory so-called Intelligent

Design strikes me as retrograde. Not a corrective to what's harsh about the theory of evolution, Intelligent Design is a retrograde ascribing back to God not just the good order but also all that attending destruction.

Really, we've assumed God as ruinous because we are ruinous, because ruin is easier than repair. Of course (we conclude) God would want a clean slate! Of course (we assume) God would want to start over again. What a mess this whole thing had become, and how good God is. Of course, he would want to keep better company.

The story of Noah, how it ends, troubles this glib shrugging of shoulders. "Never again shall all flesh be cut off. Never again shall the solution to wrong-doing be abandonment and utter ruin." No, as promised in the sign of the rainbow, as guaranteed in the rainbow serving as a reminder, God would be about repair, God would restrain his purported power and desire to destroy, would instead meet this world, which is a messy mix of good and bad, with a promising mix of sunshine and rain—this for at least God to see and remember, to recognize and know we're in this together. Now, God would be about reconciliation and renewal and a moving on to try again, to try again to do what's good: natality, new birth, this divine power, this also human capacity to birth something new even amidst so much that's gone wrong. "See," the Lord said according to the prophet Isaiah, "I am doing a new thing! Even now it springs up. Do you not perceive it?"

Yes, for all the problems the story of Noah's ark presents, there is at least this, that with it our imaginings of God are to begin to change. With this, we are to change our minds about God. Repentance, if you will. Repentance, in Greek *metanoia*, that change of mind, that expansion of knowing—that God isn't one to give up as it once seemed God was, as it was once much storied about God to be. God wouldn't ruin but would redeem.

Mind you, it wouldn't take long for humanity to test that conviction. No, because not but a few verses hence, we're right back in it. The animals have *just* headed out to the four corners of the earth when Noah would himself commit the crime. Noah himself, the righteous, the one deemed righteous enough to find worthy entry on the ark: he would himself be the one to get the whole cycle of sin started again.

And it's not clear what the crime was. The story is vague about it, something about Noah being naked and having his sons see, which suggests to me something about an intergenerational violation, the shame of the adult world born onto children. There are some things adults should keep to themselves, shouldn't involve children in. But whatever the story might have intended it to

be, one thing is clear: it took nearly no time until someone got something going that would tempt toward divine intolerance, that would court another godly purge.

Whack-a-mole: sin everywhere! What's a God to do?

I'm reading Hannah Arendt again, two pages a day, maybe three if I've got the time. She's insightful about the obvious, so with every sentence my response is always a long pause, a trying to take it in, and then a realizing which comes down to, over and over again, "Oh, yeah."

This time it's *The Human Condition*, a long essay she wrote once she was settled in the United States. A German-born Jew, she'd made her way across Europe, one step ahead of the Nazis—or more like half a step. The Gestapo did imprison her in 1933, when they first came to power, imprisoned her for doing research into antisemitism. She eventually made it to the United States in 1950, where she lived in New York, also died in New York, and is buried as cremains at nearby Bard College.

I've read both that *The Human Condition* is her most influential work and her most controversial work, in which she recognizes as one inescapable quality of the human condition to be our capacity for starting something whose outcome we can't possibly know, our capacity for natality if not also ultimate control.

In this context, Arendt lifts up the political theory of a most crucial historical figure, one who introduced into public consciousness the imperative of forgiveness—that what we begin doesn't always go as we intend, that it will always have some harmful consequence and therefore we will ever rely on forgiveness in order that we ever muster the will and courage to try again, to birth again something new.

And who is the political theorist whom she credits with this introduction of forgiveness into the body politic of the whole wide world but Jesus of Nazareth.

Reading it I felt like I'd gone to a party populated by all the impressive people I expected would be there, but then I turned and bumped into my best friend, whom I had no idea had even been invited! Maybe he was crashing the party?

Arendt writes: "The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth." And she describes his formulation of things as radical. "Man," she writes, in the colloquialism of her time, when to speak of Man was to speak of humanity, "is, in the gospel, not supposed to forgive because God forgives and he must do 'likewise,'" but because "they know not what they do."

This, of course, is one of Jesus' remembered utterances from the cross, that they "know not what they do." But it also names the truth of all of human doings, the natural phenomenon and our human condition that, though we can begin something, we can only barely control it, and we certainly can't determine its ultimate end.

This is nowhere more obviously true than when we embark on actual natality, the making of new humans. Granted, there are parents who seem to think they can program their children and be guaranteed certain outcomes. (Have Mozart's music as ambient noise while they nap in their cribs and eighteen years later, they're sure to get into Harvard, or at the very least Yale. Hey, I went to Colby; it was the Beatles for me.) But it's mostly understood that new humans will become as they will, only hardly reflecting whatever will their parents brought to the project.

See, what we begin in the world will take a course and reach an end that remain a mystery until played out. We know not what we do. And yet we keep doing, we *must* keep doing. That's what we're made to do, made in God's image, made for God's purpose.

Arendt writes of this otherwise inescapable condition: "...trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving...in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that of to begin something new.

"Forgiving, in other words," she continues, "is the only reaction which does not merely react but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. The freedom contained in Jesus' teachings of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance."

And this, Arendt accepts as a miracle. "The miracle that saves the world," she writes, "the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality... the birth of new men and the new beginning," these which occur within the continuation of the creation, the continuation of this condition now redeemed rather than given over to ruin.

"Never again," promised God.

Or perhaps it was "Never," and we simply made an assumption that once it was that God gave up. But maybe, rather, that was us—our urge to purge, a final solution to so persistent a problem, an urge so powerful and so terrible that we thought it God's.

Maybe this Lent that would be worthy of giving up, the belief that God would urge ruin. Maybe this Lent what's worthy of giving up is a belief in a god who would give up.

It is Lent, of course, this the first Sunday of it, the six-week season of penitence and preparation for our encounter with the cross. Six weeks is to map onto Jesus' time in the wilderness where he was himself preparing for being the Christ, the anointed one of God.

Mark's version of the temptation is typically short. Mark doesn't linger on anything. He's too busy just trying to keep up. The two other synoptic versions of this story, both written later than this earliest one, Mark, take more time. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus is seen to have spoken with the tempter, to have withstood three temptations that were largely about how he would exercise such power in the world. But Mark just casts him out into the wilderness, which would have been understood as a formless void, an uncreated realm, not unlike what you'd find under the ark. Jesus was first under the water in his baptism. He was then as under the water in the darkened deep of the wilderness, cast out there in the same word as would come later to describe what he did to unclean spirits, casting them out so to make what torment they caused come to rest.

Mark imagines a turf war here. The world had come to be occupied by spirits other than holy ones. It was (and indeed is) bent on self-destruction, insistent on utter ruin. It's driven to be worthy of God giving up on it. In Jesus, Mark imagines God come to occupy it ever more fully, until any ruin will rather come to redemption, any insistence upon destruction will rather be ground for something new, something good, something more of God, evermore of God.

These six weeks, these forty days: they're to test whether Jesus had the powerful restraint that would be needed here, whether he had the wisdom to see and the courage to do what was needed here. It wasn't (and isn't) to join in with the powers that destroy, and especially not the ones that destroy in the name of saving. What's needed here is to encounter, to stand witness as the immediate presence of God, come what may.

What would come, as we know, was the cross—because when someone's spoiling for a fight, but you refuse to fight because you're confident you've already won, they'll do whatever it takes to prove you wrong. So, here it begins, this God's doing a new thing, Jesus in the wilderness, in so formless a void it can hardly even be imagined into or spoken of.

The wordlessness of our gospel writer when it comes to this part of the story: this too should speak volumes.

Jesus understands himself as not on the ark but under it.

For this, there's hope for us all.  
Thanks be to God.