

WE HEAR YOU CALL OUR NAME

Lent 1 – Cycle B: Gen. 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15

One of the gifts of the season of Lent is its proclamation of God as the God of the Fresh Start. The rest of the year acquaints us with the God of New Beginnings and the God of Second Chances, but Lent is a six-week in-depth lesson on fresh starts and how important this understanding of God is for people and communities who are given second chances and who make new beginnings. What we learn during Lent is that we are never without hope; that the end is the beginning; that God's grace extends to wiping the slate clean so that our fresh start can really be fresh. A couple of years ago, one of our confirmands observed in class one Thursday, "God not only forgives our sin; God *forgets* our sin."

I was particularly interested that we read the psalm this morning, as opposed to singing it, because it is more prayer than hymn. Any one of us could have prayed it at a time in our life when we felt desperate and needed the comfort and assurance that enters our lives when we open the door to faith. The psalmist prays for mercy and protection, even though he or she acknowledges that none of us is blameless before God; the psalmist prays for instruction and guidance: "Make me to know your ways, teach me your paths," a line that inspired the text of today's anthem. There is an appeal to God to remember the covenant: "Be mindful of your mercy and steadfast love;" and a prayer for forgiveness: "Do not remember the sins of my youth." It is a magnificent prayer which, interestingly, ends with something like a hymn in which God is praised as rescuer, healer, defender, provider, teacher, and guide; as One whose love is steadfast; as One who keeps covenant with those who keep covenant.

Covenant, of course, is the essential end-point of the Genesis account of the Great Flood – essential, because if the story had not been resolved with God's repentance before Noah and the other survivors, our understanding of God's faithfulness, mercy, and forgiveness would always be qualified by the memory of how God's anger at human sin could result in our annihilation. So much for the God of Second Chances and New Beginnings. We would know only of the God of the Fresh Start.

But those who crafted the Noah story wanted to repair a general misconception concerning God, the misconception that humanity is kept on a short leash, that exercising freewill will inevitably lead to our destruction; that God is the divine punisher; that every flood, tsunami, earthquake, hurricane, eruption, and avalanche is God's little reminder to humanity that God is not to be trifled with. God's reign is a reign of terror: the life of faith is circumscribed by conditional love.

But, as we know, the story ends quite differently. God says to the survivors which, incidentally, we are intended to number ourselves among, "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." And then, the sign of the covenant, the rainbow, which, in a sense, bridged heaven and earth, was chosen as a mutual reminder of God's repentance, of human sinfulness, of God's promise of steadfast love and mercy, of the longevity of the covenant. This story has power for us, thousands of years after it was first told, not because of its theological significance, but because of its connection with our time and place: we can look up into the sky after rain, admire the magnificence and beauty of a rainbow, which really is other-worldly, and remember how it seals the covenant. It is an excellent example of how myth and truth are interwoven: the Noah story is fanciful, but the truth concerning God's faithfulness, mercy, and forgiveness transcends the story and establishes a live-giving rather than a life-destroying relationship with the One who is our beginning and our end.

For Christians, Christ is the sign of God's covenant, the new covenant we call it. And Christ is our sign because we really are among those who follow and betray him. The gospels are written in such a way that we become his disciples: we love him, we follow him, we hail his entry into Jerusalem. The power of story is made more powerful by the testimony of the early church – those who died as martyrs; those who risked everything to pass along his words of life. And we recognize our unbroken continuity with those first believers: baptism is the sign of our continuity and, in a sense, God's covenant with the church. But Christ himself, because he embodied the unconditional love and power of God, and because the covenant proclaimed through the Noah story in the Hebrew Bible proved in Christ Jesus to be authentic and true is the sign of covenant for Christians. All our crosses, crucifixes, the wine and bread, the water of Holy Baptism, and yes, even and especially the believers who are gathered by the Word which lives

within and among us – all of these proclaim Christ and the truth that we have learned through his ministry, through his death on the cross, and through his resurrection. “Never was love like this” says one of our hymns. And we see the marks of God in everything he said and did.

Mark’s telling of Jesus forty days in the wilderness is bare-bones compared with Matthew’s and Luke’s. Mark is not one to dwell on things; Jesus is always on the move in his telling of Jesus’ story. And so, it seems, for Mark, Jesus’ getting on with it is the important thing. In Mark, Jesus is in perfect continuity with John’s ministry: “...after John was arrested,” Mark writes, “Jesus came to Galilee...proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The good news is precisely this: that the time is fulfilled – an incredible claim when we think of it, i.e. that all of human history is brought to the moment of Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel. The mercy of God, intuited by many and incorporated in the Noah story, is proclaimed by Jesus’ statement “the kingdom of God has come near,” meaning that we are brought by the event of Jesus Christ to a moment of decision about how to live our lives – specifically, acknowledging the grace that is present and available for us who hear Christ’s gospel call.

Lent gives us time to hear Christ’s call, God’s call in Christ Jesus; and to make a fresh start, a completely fresh start.