

First Sunday in Lent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 2.21.21

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

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Traditionally Lent is a penitential time, a time to look inward, examine our spiritual life and metaphorically clean house. It is the custom to spend time in prayer, fasting and meditation. All of these practices are good and useful.

This past year has been one in which most of our lives have been turned upside down. Much that we took for granted has not been easy or in some cases even possible. Simply going to the grocery store has required masks, sanitizer and social distancing. For many, the simple task of choosing our food has become a matter of ordering on line and picking up at curb side what others have chosen for us. In many ways the entire past year has been an opportunity to examine the way we live.

This year, as we come to the first Sunday in Lent, I would like to propose we consider a different kind of Lent. Rather than doing things as we have always done them, this Lent can be an invitation to something new and different. Invitations are exciting, they give us an opportunity to anticipate being exposed to new ideas, new people and new ways of thinking. This Lent we are invited to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage. We can do this without ever leaving home.

The season of Lent is often described as a journey, but journey is different from pilgrimage. A journey's focus is on the beginning and the end with the middle part, the largest part of the journey being somewhat incidental, something to be gotten through to reach and end.

A pilgrimage is less about the destination and more about the path along the way. It is a trek which has as its purpose finding something deep within us, something that matters to our spiritual life. Phil Cousineau has spent much of his life in pilgrimage. He says of the experience: "With a deepening of focus, deep preparation, attention to the path below our feet, and respect for the destination at hand, it is possible to transform even the most ordinary trip into a sacred journey." Focus, preparation attention to the moment and respect for the insights gleaned, that is the invitation to an inward, spiritual pilgrimage during these forty days set aside for the purpose. This first Sunday of Lent is the place where we begin, with the story of God's covenant with Noah and the narrative of the Baptism of Jesus which inaugurates his ministry.

You all remember the story of the Great Flood and the ark Noah was instructed to build. It is a story that has been so adopted by the culture that we remember the sweet elements of animals two by two, of a dove and an olive branch but we forget why there was a flood in first place.

God, who had created the universe and everything in it, had given freedom to human beings. The humans had misused their freedom beginning with Adam and Eve and only getting worse as time went on. The world had become a place of violence, disobedience and evil. The result was a broken relationship between the creator and the created, between individuals, families and social groups. Sin, in this instance was not the violation of a specific law but the corruption of God's intended purpose for creation. God was angry. In anger, God resolved to destroy what he had created. The only remnant was to be Noah and his family along with a pair of each of the animals on earth.

The rains came, the waters rose and ultimately everything outside the ark was destroyed. What came next is important for us. God changed God's mind. Instead of threat and destruction there was a radical new beginning, a new creation and covenant. God promised never again to destroy the world. This promise was something new in that it was universal, including all humankind. It was new in that it was ecological, including all the animals and the earth. God chose to enter into a covenant of inclusive grace.

The grace of God can be summed up as mercy, compassion and care for all that God has made. God is a God of infinite grace and at the same time a God that requires justice. The justice of God is realized when

each part of the creation has enough to live and thrive as God intended. God's justice is distributive justice, not the justice of punishment and retribution but of abundance and sharing.

The old creation had been swept away by the floodwaters. The new creation was to be realized through the very human beings who had so angered God. Human beings who are made in the image and likeness of God continue to have dominion over the creation. Dominion much misunderstood, it is not permission to do as we please. It is not the right to exploit for our personal gain. Dominion is the responsibility of each human being to fulfill God's promises of justice, mercy and compassion through our actions, through what we do and refrain from doing each day. We do this on behalf of God.

The sign of the new creation was to be the rainbow seen in the heavens after a storm. The rainbow was to remind God of God's promise that no matter how the humans failed in their attempt to live in justice and mercy, God would never again destroy. The rainbow is a reminder to human beings that God is present and will never abandon us.

Centuries later, we come to the banks of the Jordan River where once again, God acts. Once again here is an opportunity, an invitation to enter into a new relationship with God. The invitation is extended to us through Jesus the fully human and fully divine, the Son of God. "...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."

To repent, to believe and to claim our part in the kingdom of God which has come near. That is the invitation available to us this Lent. It is an invitation to pilgrimage, to a spiritual trek, step by step to deeper repentance, deeper belief and more peaceful trust in the promise of God. We are invited to a personal new creation. We are invited to a personal renewed relationship with God.

It is never too late, we are never too sinful, always we can begin again.