

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

Every Living Creature
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It has long been interesting (and puzzling) to me that one of the most popular Bible stories for children is Noah's Ark and the Flood. Let's face it: it's a disaster story, an apocalyptic nightmare of destruction. But somehow, because of that mental image of all kinds of animals going 2 by 2 into the ark and coming out again, we think it is a pretty story. Really, it's not.

Have you ever imagined the landscape that presented itself to Noah and his family once they could open the windows and doors of the ark? I can. I imagine that it looked something like a beach in Japan after the earthquake and tsunami of 2011: scraped clean of life, full of debris, a muddy mess. Or maybe it was something like a state park in southern Texas after Hurricane Harvey, or parts of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. We hardly ever depict *that* kind of desolation in our children's Bibles. And, according to the story, the source of all that destruction and desolation was the "wickedness of human kind, with every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts being evil continually"...and the fact that "the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and ...filled with violence." It says that God was "grieved in his heart" about the way that human beings had wrecked a beautiful and good creation. Paradoxically, in the story, God decides to complete the wreckage and begin with a "clean slate," a new earth, so to speak. The survivors are given the original command of the first creation, "be fruitful and multiply." This can be troubling enough for adults, and we have a hard time making moral sense out of the whole thing for our children.

Today we heard that God speaks to Noah and his family at the dawn of this new age. I can imagine their shell-shocked faces as they stare around and contemplate the work they must now do to survive. God is not making conversation, but making a promise: "As for me (YHWH), I now establish my covenant with you and your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the wild animals, the domesticated animals, all the earth's creatures with you that came out of the ark — all the earth's creatures" (Gen. 9:9-10). Notice the repetition. Might this be deliberate, to remind all who will hear this covenant that it is not made only with God's human creatures but with all of God's creatures? This pronouncement includes dragonflies and dung beetles, as well as Moses and Mary. The creator of the cosmos is offering a cosmic covenant.

More than anything else, this resembles a peace offering and a call to peace. A divine archer's bow is placed in the sky as a breathtaking, colorful icon of nonviolence. In the story, this beautiful bow in the clouds is not really for our viewing enjoyment. We can look at it if we like, and remember this covenant, this promise of divine forbearance after rainstorms. But it says in the text that it will help God remember! It is a mnemonic device for God, to help God remember that a flood is no longer an option as a punishment; to remind God that divine sustenance and nurture – for every living creature – is on the top of the agenda. God's love for creation means that there is a way for all creatures to thrive, if not exactly is simple harmony, at least in balance. God's subversive, almost irrational redemption is ultimately for the sake of a world without violence: like swords turned into ploughshares, God remakes the archer's bow into a rainbow, and an ancient story of ruin becomes a stirring, challenging testament to God's peaceable kingdom.

How have we humans accepted this peace offering, this promise of forbearance? Wouldn't it be nice to say that we responded by saying, "We love creation too! We want every living creature to thrive too! We can help make this happen!" Well, as we look at recent history, and the daily news, we see not only monumental failures to care for every living *human* creature. We are beginning to recognize that we humans are the primary cause of the potential failure and collapse of the planet, that we have not been particularly conscious or careful of the success and livability of this place. We have not responded to the rainbow promise - which was one-sided, by the way. God did not demand a reciprocal promise, but just let us loose. We have not responded in ways that showed our love and respect for the gift of creation. Perhaps the temptations for personal gain and immediate satisfaction have always been just too enticing. Hmmmm...temptation.

On this Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, we are given one version or another of the Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness. In Mark's version, the shortest, and perhaps the oldest of the 3 accounts, we get very little detail. Instead, we get what I might call a disruptive introduction. At his baptism, Jesus does not see a lovely parting of the clouds, with the requisite beams of sunlight, or a rainbow. He sees the heavens *torn open*. That lovely dove-like Spirit descends with divine affirmation and then drives him, or we might say *ejects* him, into a desolate place. We have no idea what the first 30 years of Jesus' life were like, but here, at the beginning of the Gospel, we are being told, "Hold on to your hats: this is going to be a rocky ride." The stage is set for cosmic disruption.

The entire period in the desert, or the wilderness, is described in one sentence, almost in bullet points: 40 days; tempted or tested by Satan; he was with wild beasts; angels or messengers waited on him. Turns out that there was a lot going on in that desolate place: Jesus has a lot of company. Mark's Gospel is the only one, though, that mentions these "wild beasts," a curious detail. Even though he has left human contact behind, he is not spiritually or physically alone. The Tempter, the wild animals and the angels represent a cosmic encounter, where Jesus seeks and finds a way to live into his ministry, to understand the Kingdom of God. So what was this temptation or testing all about? Remember, the Gospel writer Mark does not give us any actual conversations or verbal temptations.

Perhaps the root of temptation has always been the same, whether in the folk tales of ancient Israel or in a village in Galilee or when we are immersed in social media. Maybe the whisper of temptation sounds like this: "I am not related to you. I don't need you. So, my actions have no consequences."

Perhaps the root of redemption has always been the same, whether in our ancient stories or our current dilemmas. Maybe the whisper of grace sounds like this: "We are all inter-related. We need each other. My actions have consequences, for you and for me." The flood reminds us how bad things can be when we are tempted to the self-centeredness that leads to corruption and violence. The rainbow gives us hope that we can find reconciliation when we live up to God's act of trust in us.

In our tradition, Lent is a time for owning our faults and repenting of them - not only our personal faults, but our collective ones. Now, I could think strictly in terms of water, since we have been speaking of the flood and of the desert. We could think in terms of each person's need for water. When we don't have enough, when we get very dehydrated (and this is true of a hangover, by the way, when we have not cared for our body's needs) we experience pain. For most of us, this would be a private pain, a private suffering. But if we open our minds up, we find out that the UN estimates that 783 million people do not have enough access to clean water. So one person's hangover may be magnified a million times: just think of the intense pain felt by children who die

from dehydration. That pain is real. Pain kills bodies, but it also damages souls if it goes on long enough and intensely enough. Apart from Christian theology, there are some pretty simple facts staring us in the face. People without water, men and women and children in this world, are in pain. Children who drink poisoned water get sick. That pain can be nothing but evil if it is preventable.

Or, reminded by that weapon placed in the sky after a storm, I could think of our collective addiction to violence. This addiction leads to self-centered notions of freedom which allow possession of automatic weapons to become some kind of human right. We can read stories and statistics, be horrified, pray for victims. We can read that last Wednesday's slaughter in Parkland, Florida was the eighth shooting on school ground in the United States since the first of this year – in other words eight school shootings in 45 days. We can read that the 19-year-old suspect was troubled and that he owned semi-automatic weapons and multiple rounds of ammunition. Then there are the photographs of distraught parents, children and teachers, the tearful vigils. And I read the words of theologian Miroslav Volf: "There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem that you are unwilling to solve."

But our tempter says: "I am not related to you. I don't need you. So, my actions have no consequences." Perhaps another tempter says, "These issues get so political. They have nothing to do with Lent or church." But if we believe that God is a God of love for every living creature, and that God loves those in pain, then the math becomes pretty simple. It doesn't have to be about hugging trees or saving whales or giving up all guns. You don't have to hang out with the wild beasts as Jesus did. But if Jesus is the one you follow, then ignoring those who are hurt by wounds inflicted by humans on earth's body, or on a child's body really just isn't an option—at least according to those really edgy, political words I heard Jesus say about loving our neighbors.

These two passages point toward a certain kind of care for God's creation and God's children. In the light of the Flood story, we might be reminded of the current crisis some have called "The Sixth Extinction." We might re-commit ourselves to our role as guardians of the earth's biodiversity. Or we might reflect on the ways in which creation care is embedded in our faith tradition: originally humans are created to "till and keep" the garden, and then given a second chance to recall and reclaim that birthright through the new creation in the story of the ark full of "wild beasts." God's great primal covenant isn't just with us - it's with "every living creature." Or we might remember the power of water in its creative, life-giving and destructive manifestations. How are we being faithful stewards of the gift of water? Or we might remember the children, those who are so troubled that they are capable of violence, and those who die at his hand.

I know that this sounds like an environmental scolding, or a gun rights scolding. Any one person here may feel scolded because the issues are so enormous, and we feel so powerless. Today, on the first Sunday of Lent, we remember that Jesus traveled to the margins of experience to answer the testing questions: "Am I related to you? Do I need you? Do my actions have consequences?" The Lenten journey begins in the desert and we see that the Jesus that we meet here in this story is one who is already working on God's world, working on its pain in ways that are seen and unseen and, perhaps, working in your heart. Listen to him when he says, "The time is fulfilled." The moment is now. The Kingdom of God, with all its judgment and grace, is near. Proclaim it. Live it. Repent. Be transformed. With every living creature, we are redeemed. Amen.