

1st Sunday of Lent
Sermon 2.21.21

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 1:12-13

And the Spirit [following Jesus’ baptism by John] immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (300)

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. Not anymore.

It’s easier to ruin than to repair.

A friend from childhood owns a restaurant where I grew up, a supper club. People join and get dinner out once a week, once a month, however frequently they want. She’s lost 80% of her revenue in the last year. The business struggle is real, but the relational struggle is maybe more so. She just needs people to maintain their membership through this time. She understands they won’t get their money’s worth now, but at least the business will survive and this thing that people like and can probably still afford will be there when this is all over. She just needs people to give a thought to that.

She wondered what it will feel like when all those people come back wanting supper.

I reflected back to her. “We’re going to have reconciliation work to do on a massive scale, but also one-to-one.” Are we up to that—because it’s easier to ruin than to repair.

This has been much on my mind as I hear versions of this story everywhere from almost everyone, as I live out my own versions of it.

A salon owner, single-chair, in her home, wondered of her clients when I bumped into her at the grocery store, “Where they’d all go?” She’s made her salon COVID-safe. She only sees clients one at a time. She gets calls, canceling appointments. Her revenue is down also 80%.

“The people who can, should pay you what they would,” I rushed to her defense.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I wonder what their hair will look like when they come back, if they come back. Have they been cutting it? Have they had someone else do it? What if it looks good? How will *that* feel?”

A friend who’s a photographer urged people to buy gift certificates as Christmas gifts—certificates for a family photo shoot for when this is all over. Give those at a time when shopping for gifts is a bummer, giving them can only be done my mail, and when people like her have lost so much. Weddings called off, galas called off, she was “starting to panic” when I saw her at the gas station a month into quarantine. Summer coming: that’s her big earning season, like almost everyone around here.

I meant to buy some gift certificates as gifts, just as she said. But I never got around to it. I was too overwhelmed to do much of anything for Christmas, too overwhelmed and too sad.

I hope she’s okay—and then I put her out of my mind.

We’re really not that close.

I’ve gone a full year without seeing her.

Maybe she’s not that important to me.

It’s easier to ruin than to repair.

There are many things about the story of the flood that are problematic. It’s funny, then, that this 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 so upsetting to consider. Maybe it’s thought all this would all be lost on children—

—though I don’t know. I think that’s a pretty natural fear, that the god of your life will abandon you when you become fully the monster that you’re always about to become. Jack used to imagine me giving up on him all the time. As a three-year-old, a four-year-old, into older childhood, he’d insist that I should just put him out with the recycling, that that’s clearly what I wanted to do with him.

I did find some relief in that he imagined himself destined for the recycling. “Good Christian boy,” I’d think, “he at least believes in redemption.” At least he didn’t imagine himself destined for the trash.

“No,” I’d insist, as he was heading neither for the trash nor even the recycling. “You’re stuck with me. We’re in this together. We gotta work it out.” Not that I’d say as much to him. Usually, I’d just hug him tighter.

He always did find tight swaddling a good solution.

So, maybe all those ark toys: maybe they’re to seed the possibility that we’d have been the ones on the ark. That you, dear child (dear, difficult child) to whom I’ve given a toy ark: you’d have been on the ark, not under it.

Or maybe we’re just not supposed to think about that much. The ducks are cute. The boat is fun. Don’t think too much about it. (3:50 minutes.)

Once upon a time, for the Lord the skies they parted.

So, if you must die to bring us back to where we started: two at a time. (x4)

Each and every kind, were gathered up—this tiny boat, the future of the world.

For those that drown it made no sense. They should have known because we told them so.

Two at a time (x4). Do what you're told.

I can see the rains are coming to wash away the filth and vermin

Hand in hand we'll watch them run and go

Now it's summertime. Long ago the skies they parted.

So, a few have died to bring us back to where we started: Two at a time (x4)

Do what you're told.

We’ve assumed God as ruinous. Because there is so much ruin. Because creation is ruinous—this calamity and the covenant that followed involving not just humans but all flesh. The cruelty of the creation—baby iguanas to reach their mothers made to trek across the beach while racer snakes chase them, elephants that get separated from their clans in dust storms, viruses, evolutionary dead ends. The profligacy! This created order doesn’t add up.

We assumed God as ruinous because we are ruinous, because ruin is easier than repair. Of course, God would want a clean slate! Of course, 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.

For all the problems the story of Noah’s ark presents, here’s something profound: that with it, our imaginings of God are to change. Now God would not be about ruin. 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.

It wouldn't take long. It wouldn't take long for the creation, and its people, to challenge this conviction. Just a few verses hence, following the emergence from the ark, following the reentry onto now dry land, following a settling in and a setting forth, Noah would 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. Like Adam and Eve and the fruit of knowledge before him, and then Cain and Abel and the enviable offering to God before him, now Noah.

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 might actually have been indicated here, one thing is clear: it took nearly no time until someone got something going that would be nearly impossible to wipe clean or undo, would be only hardly dealt with, with great difficulty put to rest, if at all.

Whack-a-mole.

The pervasion of sin. There is nothing in the world that isn't touched by sin—neither people, nor our ways of organizing ourselves, nor the creation with its baby iguanas and racer snakes and other wild beats doing their wild worst. There is nothing, from the most righteous thing to the most debased thing, that isn't touched by sin—

—that isn't also touched by grace.

God is at work in all things for good. That's the power of redemption, that's the persistence of God, and that's the coming of the kingdom in Jesus to the world.

Just prior to the scene we heard about moments ago, the Spirit having driven Jesus into the wilderness, it's remembered, Jesus' baptism, when the heavens were torn open, and the Spirit of God descended upon him. By this, perhaps, the kingdom of God had come near, which Jesus would proclaim moments from now, "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near."

This is the significance of this tearing open. This is the significance: that now, in Jesus, the kingdom of God had come near.

This nearness, this *immediacy*: it would be called to mind again when, following Jesus' death, the curtain of the Temple would likewise be torn open. The curtain had been to separate

the inner courts of the Temple from the innermost court, the Holy of Holies. The curtain had been to separate the people from their God, to protect the people from the burning presence of the Lord. But that separation had become false, inappropriate to God's purpose. That separation had become useful to sin. So, it needed to come down. It needed to be torn open—one ruined thing that everything else might be repaired.

Jesus coming to the world is as to repair the world—to knit it back to its God, to grace it as a balm to heal and sooth its mindless brutality and profligate waste. The wild beasts with him like pets, like friends: all that's ruinous is intended for repair.

These forty days in the wilderness would test his readiness. How corruptible would he prove to be? How available to sin is he?

These forty days of Lent might be ours to test us.

We have the work of repair waiting for us on the other side this slow-rolling catastrophe, all of us in it together all alone. We are each experiencing this slow trauma, with its pocks of urgent suffering, in forced isolation and so with our own deeply felt responses and reactions. We are each meeting our own limits, which though take us by surprise. Friends get together a walk and I realize I can't join them because it will hurt too much for all that it cannot be. I drive by the kids' school, and I weep for its relative emptiness and for all the teachers' frustrated efforts (I imagine) to do what they love. I walk through town and grieve another store closing, though I never shopped in that store—grieve because maybe I should have.

This suspended animation: how long can it last before it just deteriorates into ruin?

And maybe that's just easier anyway. So, it's fine.

It's fine.

I think I've never been tested in a wilderness quite like we all are now.

As for forty days, that's just a way of naming a really long time, an immeasurably long time.

It's been for us a really long time.

God is with us. The reign of God, the occurrence of God: it is real, it is near. Enter that reign like it's your ark. We will make it through this. And the work of repair awaiting us on the other side: it might come as a real joy.

Thanks be to God.