

Reflection on the Word: Lent 1 – Feb 18, 2018 Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Here we are at the first Sunday of Lent... For some of us, our Lenten journey began in earnest on Wednesday with the Ecumenical Noon Lenten Service or with the imposition of ashes during worship on Wednesday evening. Knowing that Lent has traditionally been a time of prayer, repentance and fasting, one might think that our theme today would be something like "We Keep Sinning," or "Why We Need to Repent." But instead of penance and remorse for our brokenness, I am proposing that our focus be a much more positive and life-giving one – with the tender claim that "God Loves Us."

Hold on, you might say --- what about the biblical account of Noah and the flood that destroyed the earth? Surely that has to do with God judging humankind and finding it very wanting – so much so that God decides on a do-over of creation itself. As you no doubt recall – God chooses one man, Noah, and his family, establishing a kind of new Adam and a fresh start for humanity, along with all created things which enter the ark in pairs. God begins the story again, with an offer, a gift, of the very first covenant between God and humankind.

Of course, we who know the subsequent stories of scripture are aware that even *after* the flood, people would continue to sin and turn away from God ... but now, because of God's covenant promise, things are different.

It's not all about what *we humans* are doing, or not doing, in the world. The primary actor in the long story of faith is *God*, not us. In the story of Noah and the Ark, we have a dramatic example of God at the center of things: God is the One who speaks, acts and, one might even say, *feels*. God is actually the one who "turns away" from a path (the thing we're supposed to do during Lent when we "repent") and makes a promise never again to destroy humankind and the earth with a flood.

In our contemporary, self-indulgent, self-focused culture, we need to be reminded that it's not all about us, but about God. It's about what God is doing and has done not only here and now, but in times long ago and in a future we cannot even dimly see. And always, we learn and re-learn in these stories, the ancient truth that *God loves us*.

That love, however, does not mean that God closes an eye to sin and wickedness. David J. Lose reminds us that our ancient ancestors in faith understood God as a God of both power and justice: "The One who created all things also stands as judge over all things and is entitled to destroy all things when they prove so disappointing." And though the flood story might suggest a

theme of "God Punishes Us" or "We Get What We Deserve," even more so, it is about God's love for us, because as Lose puts it: "God's promise never to repeat this kind of destruction is "an unheard-of surrendering of divine power," and it introduces a new dimension of the ancient Hebrews' understanding of God as "inherently self-giving, willing to enter into a relationship that puts limits on even God's prerogatives."

The God of this ancient story is described as a God who is "adaptable, touched to the heart by creation, and willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive." God refuses to give up on us, William Lloyd Allen says, because "God's heart is touched by creation's suffering. The God declaring this covenant is not an objective judge meting out a just sentence, but a lover grieved to the heart at the beloved's violence, yet still seeking reconciliation."

Even here, are echoes of the words which we hear at Jesus' baptism, and at our own: "You are my beloved." God's covenant is all about relationship; about a promise God makes out of tenderness and compassion. And it is a universal covenant; with all peoples and with nature itself.

Jane Anne Ferguson has written a beautiful reflection on this text and its story of God's promise: "To see and know God as the 'One Who Remembers' us, corporately and individually, with love and forgiveness in the midst of life's chaos, with all its pain and suffering, is to discover redemption." And in that experience is a way of living for the church, to be "a place where people are willing to let their hearts be remade in the image of God's heart; a place where people will let their hearts be broken open, with grief over their own hard-heartedness and the hard-heartedness of the world and its chaos."

God's covenant, and our own baptism as a sign of that covenant promise, speaks of hope and justice for all. And perhaps today, we might ask ourselves: *In a world that sometimes seems so lacking in hope, how well do we, the Christian community, extend that hope and live that hope for others?*

To respond to that, I share a story, told by Melissa Baine Sevier. It goes like this:

There was talk at Grace Church. Sam Waters had come home.

Sam is Tom and Betty's son, and even as a child he had been a handful. Veteran church school teachers suddenly decided to take a year off when it was their turn to teach Sam.

Betty and Tom also had trouble with Sam. Once he and some other boys broke windows around town, including windows at Grace Church. The church did not press charges and Tom and Betty replaced the windows.

Just after Sam turned 18, he was driving some friends around one night. He waited while they stole a bottle of whiskey from a liquor store. He didn't know they had a gun. They emptied the cash register and shot and wounded the owner. Sam went to prison for 8 years.

When Sam got out of prison he moved away, but he could not get work. He came home to live with his parents. They were thrilled to have him home again and tried to make life normal. Sam spent his days looking for work and helping Tom on the farm. On Sundays, they came to church.

This is why people talked. How could Betty and Tom want Sam back after all he'd done? Some didn't like the idea of having an ex-con in worship.

One day Sam showed up at the minister's office. He didn't know what to do. His parents loved having him in church, and he had found he actually enjoyed worship. It meant something to him to sit beside his parents who had been so faithful. But every time they walked into the church people turned away or started whispering. He was beginning to think that it might be better if he stayed home.

The minister had seen the way Sam and his parents were treated, and had heard the talk. She'd noticed how Betty and Tom always placed Sam between them in the pew, as if to protect him from unfriendly stares. Still, she trusted the goodness of these church people. She knew they did not want to see Sam take advantage of his parents again. She said she would bring it up, with his permission, to the board.

The board grew quiet as the minister recounted her talk with Sam. Nearly everyone in the room remembered when Sam went away. They had prayed and grieved with his parents and some of them had written to him. Now that he was back, they were confused.

John Hughes was the first to speak. "Did you know that as a teenager I went to a reform school?" They had no idea. John said he could offer Sam a job.

Then Margaret Offenbach told a story of Sam in her first grade Sunday school classroom. (They had all heard this story before.) The subject was Noah and the ark and they'd made rainbows from construction paper. After class, she remembered she'd left her lesson book in the room and went back for it. There

stood Sam, drawing with permanent marker a multi-colored rainbow on the wall. "I didn't have the energy to remove it," she said, "so I just left it."

Another elder said he'd been teaching in that classroom and had tried to paint over that rainbow several times but it still showed through. Everyone laughed.

"So. What shall we do?" asked the pastor. They made a plan.

The following Sunday, Sam served as lay reader. The congregation listened intently to the readings, including the one from Genesis about the flood.

The minister took a couple of minutes off her usual sermon length, and at the time for prayer requests, she called on Sam.

He thanked the board for allowing him to read the scriptures that day. He thanked John Hughes for giving him a job, and his parents for sticking by him, even when it had been very difficult. He thanked the church for honoring the vows they had made when he was baptized. He said he knew they had not pressed charges when he had broken church windows as a boy, and appreciated that expression of love for his family.

Sam then told how the day's readings had reminded him of something that happened when he was in the first grade in Mrs. Offenbach's class. He knew most of them had heard he drew a rainbow on that wall, but they probably did not know the whole story. When Mrs. Offenbach came back into the classroom that day and saw what he was doing, she did not fuss or even tell him to stop. She stood for a moment and then said, "Well, neither one of us will make it to church on time if I don't help," and she picked up the purple marker.

When Sam told this part of the story, everyone laughed and looked at Margaret Offenbach, who appeared quite embarrassed by this new and complete version of the story she had been telling for years.

Sam said he'd gone back in that classroom one recent Sunday just to look, and to his surprise the rainbow was still there. Someone had tried to paint over it, but it still showed through.

That morning twenty years before with Mrs. Offenbach, had been the most memorable moment of all his years in church, because that day, while they drew together on the wall, a wise teacher had talked to him about grace. She

spoke of how sad God was over the way people behaved, and how the rainbow was God's promise of grace. She talked about how all of us—including grownups—make God sad sometimes, and she spoke of the rainbows of grace in her life. He remembered that she mentioned her family, her church, and his class, and even that time with him, right then, coloring on the wall.

Now, Sam said, he knew that his life had reflected that lesson. God grieved over some of the things Sam had done, yet God still showed grace. Sam had nearly covered up that grace by ignoring it. But the grace still shone through, just like the rainbow on that classroom wall.

The grace of God for him, said Sam, was in being able to come home again. He knew he did not deserve it, but he was grateful for it. Then he sat down, embarrassed that he had talked so long. But no one else had noticed the time.

From that day, it was easier for Grace Church to live up to its name. Amen.