

Sermon - 02-21-21
Ps 25:1-10; Gen 9:8-17; 1 Pe 3:18-22 | Mk 1:9-15
1st Sunday in Lent

The theme of our Scriptures for today, the first Sunday in Lent, is God's wonderful promises. Promises, in God's kingdom and character, are covenants. God reaches out, has compassion on His creation – the land, the water, the air, the plants, the animals and His people. The rainbow described in Gen 9, is the sign that He limits His wrath. He promises never again to despair of our fallen nature. Never again a world-wide flood, says the Lord.

God's desire was and will always be to come close to us – to draw us into loving relationship with Him – to bring us into His house and to lay out a generous table of good food and drink and fine fellowship – forever. After unleashing all the waters of the planet upon all His creatures in the massive flood, God regretted giving up on us – fragile and fallen humans. Let's pause and appreciate the repentance of our mighty God.

In ancient poetry, lightning bolts are imagined as the arrows of God, unleashed on the earth and all its inhabitants. After the ark was drawn up, built and then launched upon the chaos of the waters, God repented of His anger and wholesale destruction. The great divine strategy is to hang up His bow and to shoot no more lightning bolts in anger. The bow in the clouds reminds God – and us that He is curbing His unlimited power. He is holding back chaos from overwhelming the earth. This is God's choice. He is not going to tear open the heavens so violently again. The rainbow is the reminder of God's first covenant. He will come near in peace, not in violence.

The Gospel writer, Mark, describes the scene of Jesus' baptism in the river by John. Jesus sees the "heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Him." (v 10) What happened before in His life: the Egyptian sojourn with His mom and dad, the carpentry business in Nazareth, and perhaps His work in Sepphoris – all that is set aside after the dramatic anointing in the Jordan River. He won't "go home" after this. He will follow the Holy Spirit out into the desert where He will be tested. Then He will call His disciples and launch His ministry.

Jesus is the portrait or exact image of God the Father – sent, anointed, commissioned and walking personally among human beings as one of us. This is the vital continuation of God's intention to be near His creation – especially His people. Jesus Christ fulfills the promise of God coming in peace to woo and win a people for Himself. God is not the creation. As, Creator God draws near.

As the waters lifted Noah's ark and carried those human and animal passengers to safety through the storm, so Jesus is our divine deliverance from rebellion against God. We receive baptism, as a sign of inward grace. Jesus received baptism not to be cleansed – because He did not need cleansing – but to show His complete obedience to His heavenly Father.

When we mortals go under the water of baptism it does represent cleansing – the washing provided by Jesus' blood. God the Son comes near to make a way for us. The Gospel shows that the Father was well pleased to see Jesus enact this drama of transforming love. How we need transformation – not just once, but again and again as we grow in Him. We set aside these forty days of Lent to be intentional about our journey. And God comes near.

St Peter lays out the whole picture for us – for the churches he wrote to encourage. In baptism we remember when the Father came so near: ¹⁸... *Christ died for sins once and for all...on behalf of sinners, in order to lead you (and me) to God. He was put to death physically, but made alive spiritually,* ¹⁹ *and in his spiritual existence he went and preached to the imprisoned spirits.* ²⁰ *These were the spirits of those who had not obeyed God when he waited patiently during the days that Noah was building his boat. The few people in the boat—eight in all—were saved by the water,* ²¹...*a symbol pointing to baptism...It is not the washing off of bodily dirt, but the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,* ²² *who has gone to heaven and is at the right side of God, ruling over all angels and heavenly authorities and powers.*

(1 Pe 3:18-22 GNT)

(Continued on next page.)

God has come near, and He promises never to leave or forsake you and me. This is the Good News! He loves you just as you are – He promises to cleanse you and make you able to approach Him in holiness. Jesus grants you and me His holiness so we can be in God's presence.

I pray we will observe the days of Lent. Is forty days too long? Not at all. Keep at it. Be diligent every day. Set aside some time. Light a candle, if you wish. Pray for insight. Read your devotions. Take time to listen to what the Spirit is saying. May you be richly rewarded in God's presence. God promises to show up. He longs to be with you and to shape you in the image of Jesus. Amen.