

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

DATE

Again and Again, God Meets Us

Genesis 9:8-17 Lent 1

Again and Again, God meets us.

If today's Gospel reading is giving you a bit of de ja vu, you're likely not alone. If you joined us earlier in January, we had this reading when we marked Baptism of our Lord Sunday. Pastor Jon gave a fantastic sermon on the heavens being torn apart. And well, Mark doesn't give me a whole lot to go on for the temptation narrative. So I'm going to go primarily with Genesis this morning.

A very brief recap of Genesis up to this point. God creates the world. God creates humans – Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve mess it all up in the garden, pressured to eat a piece of fruit by a snake. They are kicked out of the garden. They have kids. Cain kills Abel. And then there's this weird bit about humans procreating with these weird demigod-like Giants (Genesis 6 is WILD, y'all). Let's just say that humanity isn't off to the... best start. Ya know. Disobedience. Murder. Sexual immorality (at least as deemed by the text).

So God gets mad. And probably a bit heartbroken. That the culmination of God's creation – humanity - has already gone so far from what God intended for it. Humans were created not just as good. But as the Hebrew says, *tov meod*, very good. And they seem, well, anything but very good. What God intended in creation

seems so far from reality, so far from happening. In that heartbreak and in that anger, God seems to make a rash decision; it is better to destroy most of God's own creation [not just humanity by the way] in a flood. To try to start all over again. This piece of that story makes me so uncomfortable.

Noah's ark is a beloved story – it became a thing in our household, as my brother and I are twins. SO MUCH NOAH'S ARK. Two by two. We've romanticized it in kids' storybooks and in Sight and Sound productions. And on one level, that's okay. And yet this story is also horrific. To the point that as an adult, I wonder how in the world it became a common nursery theme. This is a story of genocide that stems from God's anger, heartbreak, and disappointment in God's creation.

And so God moves forward with the plan. And we get the rain. And the flood. And the dove. And the olive branch. And finally Noah and his family (and all the animals) get to disembark. And so we get to today's text. Here, God makes a covenant with not just Noah and his family – but with all the beasts of the earth and even with the earth itself. This is what I find fascinating. God promises that when God sends rain again, God will take note of the bow in the clouds. And it will be for GOD a reminder that never again will God take such rash and drastic action against the creation that God so loves.

That is fascinating to me. That God godself sets a reminder – at least that is how the author tells the story. We have all sorts of ways of reminding us of things. There was an old trick of tying a string around one's wrist or finger in hopes that

when you see it, you'll remember what you needed to remember. I need all sorts of reminders for things. Lists. Calendars. Notifications on my phone. I put my glasses on top of my medicine case, so I don't forget to take meds in the morning.

And today, we hear that God sometimes needs a reminder too. Because underneath all of this, there's a promise here: that God refuses to let God's anger, disappointment, and/ or heartbreak push God to such drastic action. In this experience, God seems to have realized that humans are going to still mess it all up [just after this, for instance, Noah gets drunk and passes out naked, and his kids cover him up out of shame...].

Yet in this moment, in this story, the author makes a confession: we have a God that refuses to let the **worst of what humanity can be** bring **out the worst that God can be**. That God is committed to being God to us, despite knowing that we're going to mess it all up again. And this is a God that lives up to God's promises. And the bow is the sign to remind God to be God, a reminder of the covenant to be a God in relationship with humanity and with all of God's creation, despite the realities of life in this world. And those realities will never again bring out the worst that God can be.

This is where I find grace and mercy and good news in this text. God knows that humanity is flawed. God made us very good, *tov meod*, but not perfect. Humanity is going to mess up in ways that hurt one another, hurt our animal friends, and hurt the world that God so loves. Yet today, this covenant is entirely

one-sided. It is entirely on God. It is a covenant about and commitment to being God to this creation full well knowing that we won't live up to God's hopes and dreams for us. This God is going to stick it out anyway. It isn't about what we do or don't do. It is about God being the kind of God that God wants to be. This is a God who is going to meet humanity and creation on its own terms – even when those terms go against God's hopes and dreams. I've heard in a variety of circles something along the lines of: you can't control what other people do; you can only control yourself and your reactions. It is almost like God had that realization. God isn't going to keep humans from being human and from making decisions that cause harm to one another and to creation. But God is going to control how God responds to that. And God's response can transform the whole situation.

Again and again, throughout the Bible and throughout our liturgies, we've heard the phrase: God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Here, God makes a commitment to being that kind of God.

The way the author of this text writes this, I imagine it almost like God looks in a mirror during the flood and doesn't like what God sees. It sounds like God had this moment of this realization, saying to Godself, "this is not who I want to be. I do not want to be a God of the floods, a God that would destroy God's own creation. And the bow will remind me of who I want to be. And the kind of relationship I want to have with the world. A relationship that I cannot have if I react in anger and

retaliation. I want to be a God that resists the temptation to react in anger but instead reacts with steadfast love, grace, and mercy.”

And that’s the kind of God that our God is. Our God chooses to be in relationship with us and with all people, despite our fault, our failings, our sins. A relationship that is driven and grounded not in anger and retaliation, but in love, grace, and mercy. Again and again, God reaches out to humanity throughout all of our scriptures and all of human history. Refusing to let us go, refusing to let anger, sin, death have the final word. With this kind of God, ashes are never the end of the story, our sin is never the end of the story.

Again and again God meets us. And again and again, God draws us back to Godself wrapping us in God’s grace, love and mercy, transforming us and sending us out again. As we turn to the cross, in Jesus, God doubles down on this commitment to react to the pain of the world, the sin and failings of humanity, not in anger but with mercy, with love, and with life. In Jesus, the divine and the human meet and become inseparable. Jesus meets us again in flesh and bones, in our very humanity. God meets us in the beloved Son in whom God is well pleased. In Jesus, we have a God that meets us in the night, in the light, and at the threshold. And in agony on the cross, we meet God, despite with outstretched arms, showing us the very lengths that God is willing to go for God’s people. Despite God’s heartache and anger here, God reacts not in retaliation but with the empty tomb.

The heavens have been ripped open and the temple curtain ripped in two. Nothing can separate humanity and God's creation from the love of God we meet in Jesus.

Again, this is a covenant entirely on God. The covenant is not based on what we do or don't do. Because God knows that we will continue to mess it up – that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves by our own power. We need God. We need Jesus. We need the kingdom of God to come near – to our hearts, to our communities, and to our world. The promise is that again and again, God meets us. To transform us and this world through love, grace, and mercy. And through the encounters with that love, encounters that send us out as Christ to one another, as bearers of that love, God pushes us closer to what God had in mind for us from the very beginning – beloved people, created as very good, in right relationship with God, with each other, and with all creation.

Again and Again, God meets us.

Amen.