

Lent I March 1, 2009

Lent is about Easter. If we lose sight of that, we can very easily miss the power of these forty days (not counting Sundays). One way the Church helps us remember this is by having all of the Old Testament lessons in Lent focus on the notion of covenant—of God's promises to his people. We'll hear that all through Lent, and I'll be paying attention to it from the pulpit. Today's story from Genesis about (part of) the covenant with Noah is a great way to get into this, and a great way to begin Lent.

It's a powerful story. It's a *theological* story (that's good to know)—so it's a story about God, and not geology. It's a true story because it truly tells us what God is like. (Don't go climbing mountains looking for Arks; it's not *that* sort of story.) Anyway, in this story, God created the world and the world went bad. It went so bad that, in the words of Genesis, "Every inclination of the thoughts of [all] hearts was only evil continually." So, God regretted creating the earth; and God sent the flood to destroy creation, and to put an end to all flesh. Now, even if the flood might seem a bit extreme, we can understand what's going on here. The natural consequence of sin is destruction—maybe not at once, and certainly not in any predictable or linear way; but the natural consequence of sin is destruction. We know that. And that's where the reading from Genesis begins—with that destruction.

But that's not where we begin. That's not what comes first, for us, now. That's because of what happens in that little passage from Genesis we just heard. It's extraordinary—God makes a major policy decision. God says that from now on, things are going to work in a new way. God says that from now on the natural and expected course of things will be interrupted by a rainbow. The natural consequence of sin is destruction. Never the less, in his first covenant, God promises that, from now on, instead of destruction, God will bring mercy, and grace, and a different way to make things right with humanity.

Not destruction, but mercy. That's what God promises. This is a fundamental reversal of the way creation would naturally work its self out. Also, God does not say that he won't destroy us if things get better, or if they don't get worse, or if they never again get a bad as they were before the flood. (In fact, they already *were* as bad as they were before the flood). God just says "never again". And God sort of ties a string around his finger, the rainbow, so he will remember, and we will know, that what comes first from now on is mercy. That's good news.

After all, no matter how much we talk about justice, and no matter how important justice is, (and it's very important), and no matter how much we want things to be right and equitable and fair—no matter—when we get right down to it, we need that rainbow. If we honestly and fully look at the truth of our lives, the secrets of our hearts, the depths and shadows of our souls, if we look at these and hold them up to the light of a perfect and a just and righteous God, a God who *knows*; if we do that, then our reliance upon justice comes crashing down, and we can only cling with an awesome joy to any and every rainbow we can find.

This is where we begin Lent. This is where, if we are really honest, we must begin every day. We begin with the promise, the gift, of God's mercy. We begin with the rainbow; we always begin with the rainbow. Lent is about Easter. Easter came first; and Lent makes no sense without it.

Now, this doesn't mean that everything in our behavior or in our world is just the way it should be, (far from it); and this doesn't answer every question; and this doesn't always tell us what to do. But this is where we begin—and it makes a difference.

Let's bring that to the story of Jesus' temptation: Mark tells it in its barest outlines; but not having the details of the various temptations makes the larger picture clearer.

In this larger picture, the first thing that happens is Jesus' baptism, and the pronouncement of the Father's love. God says to Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased". *After* that comes the wilderness and temptation and decisions about what to do and how to live.

Notice carefully that at Jesus' Baptism God did not say, "If you make the correct decisions out there in the wilderness, then I will be very pleased with you"; God did not say, "If you get it right when you face Satan, then you will be the beloved"; and God did not say, "If you want to be a real son, or a good son, here is what you must do." Instead God said, "you are the beloved"; God gave the gift. Then, at once, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness—where he had to face the realities of evil and the importance of his own choices. In that wilderness, Jesus had to decide what it was going to look like to live out the gift of his identity, the gift of being the beloved of the Father, the gift that had already been proclaimed as his at his baptism.

That's how we begin, also. We begin with the rainbow, and with the words of our baptism ringing in our ears.

Like Jesus, we can take that with us into the business of living in our personal wildernesses, our times of facing the reality of evil, the draw of temptations and the midnight growls of whatever wild beasts there may be—whether we are talking about Lent, or about those moments in our lives when that darkness seems most real, and most immediate.

When we think about Lenten disciplines, about what we plan to take on or to give up—or both—for Lent, (and it's not too late to do that), when we think about these, it's easy to imagine that what we are about is giving ourselves enough temptations—or making enough promises—that, by resisting all these temptations, or keeping all of these promises, we can manage to get for ourselves an extra bit of divine favor, or at least a bit less wrath.

We can easily imagine that what is at issue is the basis nature of our relationship with God. But that's not what this is about. We already have that. Lenten disciplines are about a lot of things: They are about drawing us into to a deeper awareness of God's goodness and of our absolute dependence upon that mercy. They are also a sort of exercise; they are about building up some spiritual muscles so that when we really need them they will be there. They can be about learning *who* we really are and *whose* we really are. They are about all of that and much more; but they are definitely *not* about getting it right so God will care about us, or care about us more. As I said Wednesday, there is no way God could care about us more. There is no *more*.

In the same way, when we have our personal Lents, our hard times and hard choices, that's never because God is out to get us; and it's never a question of being given a test to determine whether we are going to end up on God's good side or God's bad side. Instead, the question with hard times and hard choices is not where they came from, or even what the right answer is, the question is whether and how, in the midst of even this, we are going to be faithful to the gift. The question is whether and how our lives are going to reflect the rainbow of God's gracious love. | | Temptations and choices are about what it is going to look like for us to be beloved children of God, for us to hear, to believe and to reveal the love proclaimed to us in the rainbow, and at our Baptism.

Lent is about Easter; it is about the gift already give, the words already said, the rainbow already stretched across our sky and tied around God's finger. That's where we begin, and that is what makes sense out of Lent, and everything else.