

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT | FEBRUARY 18, 2024

ISGENESIS 9:8-17 | PSALM 25:1-10 | 1 PETER 3:18-22 | MARK 1:9-15

Sometimes you make a big change in your life—maybe a new job, a new relationship, a new city—and everything seems perfect. The world seems more vivid than it used to be. It feels almost euphoric. And you can't believe your good luck. Sometimes we call this the “honeymoon phase.” Unfortunately, at some point the “phase” part of “honeymoon phase” becomes increasingly apparent, and you have to adjust to the new normal.

Scripture has its own kind of honeymoon phase, too. A time when everything is Good, just the way that God intended it to be. All of creation is at peace. The people and God are living in right relationship. It lasts for... three chapters. And after those three chapters, God and God's people have to figure out what to do when life is no longer perfect.

That's one way to think about the Hebrew Bible readings that we're going to be hearing during this season of Lent. These are among the most important Old Testament stories for us. Because these are fundamental texts about God's character. They are written and edited by people trying to figure out what kind of God created us, what kind of God redeems us, and what kind of God we worship.

That's what today's reading from the end of the flood epic is all about. This story begins, we're told, when God “saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” And we're told that this “grieved [God] to his heart.” It's worth noting here, especially because it's Lent, that God's response to human failure is not anger or rage. It's grief and sorrow. A broken heart.

So what is God going to do? You can imagine some different options. One option would be to do nothing. Just let things keep going off the rails and let creation devolve into the abyss. But we know that's not a feasible option. If something's breaking your heart and causing you pain, you're going to try to fix it. God cares enough, is moved enough by our suffering, to get involved.

Instead, God decides to try a second option. Flood the earth and start over. But as we heard in today's reading, God seems to recognize that this wasn't a great option either. Not only does it create a lot of suffering, but you have to keep doing it over and over and over again.

But as we heard in today's reading, God finds a third option. God deals with evil not by ignoring our suffering. And not just by hitting the reset button every five minutes. God addresses the evil that exists in the world by making covenants. As we move through Lent this year, you'll hear how the covenants that God makes transform us and the world we live in.

It's hard to overstate how strange of an idea this was in its original context. In the ancient world, covenants were common. But they were usually something that tribes or nations set up with each other. And if religion was invoked at all, it was just to say that my tribe's god and your tribe's god signed off on this deal. Covenants were ways of distributing power and wealth and maintaining stability. In other words, they were basically contracts or exchanges. You give up a little something and you get a little something. And when you're no longer getting what you want, you just call it off.

So the Jewish authors who wrote this text take that idea and repurpose it. And in the process they make a radical claim about God. That the way God deals with sin and suffering, anything that draws us away from trust in God and love of neighbor, is not by pretending it isn't there. And it isn't by cutting us off at the first sign of trouble. It's actually just the opposite. God responds by

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creating a lasting relationship with us. Sure enough, the Hebrew word for covenant is “b’rit” which means “binding together.” When we turn away from God, God responds by embracing us.

That embrace informs so much of what we confess about God and say about our life together. Two dynamics of this covenant are particularly important for us.

One is that this covenant is initiated and given by God. There is no negotiation back and forth trying to hammer out the terms of the deal. In fact, God gives Noah no conditions in this covenant. No “You get this covenant as long as you…” Or “If you do this, then you get the covenant.” God takes the initiative in committing to be in relationship.

We would say that this covenant is defined by grace. It’s not one that’s dependent on your actions or your potential. It’s not contingent on something. It’s one that’s freely given to you. Just like our baptismal covenant. This is why we remember flood story whenever we celebrate a baptism. We’re loved by God and accepted by God not because we’re always lovable and not because we’re always acceptable. But because God loves and accepts us.

Second, this covenant is broad. Notice who the beneficiaries of this covenant are. It’s not just Noah and his descendants. It’s “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.” And more than that, in verse thirteen, God even says the covenant includes the earth. This binding together is not just between me and my descendants. It includes people of every language and creed, gender identity and ethnicity. And it also includes, to quote “Joy to the World,” “fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains.”

We would say this covenant is universal. There is no one you will ever meet who is not included in this covenant. That includes your family. It includes your friends. It includes the people you don’t like. And it includes the people we consider to be our enemies. In other words, this is a covenant with no insiders and outsiders. Only insiders and insiders who just don’t know it yet.

God’s way of dealing with our problems is so different from our own. Too often, we respond to the world’s needs by making our love contingent. I’ll love my neighbor, but first I want to know *What’s in this for me? What do they have to offer?* Or we respond by making our scope of concern impossibly narrow. If it isn’t happening in my country or my state or my town or even my neighborhood, it’s of no concern to me. But contingent love and parochial kindness are no salvation. It’s that exact kind of narrow-mindedness that grieves that heart of God.

But as recipients of this covenant, we have been bound together. Bound both to God and to all God’s beloved. And having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to share that same love with all the world. Gracious in character. Universal in scope. Embraced together in God’s life everlasting.

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