

Wild Faith

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Lent 1B Feb. 18, 2018

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

I was planning to use the lectionary Psalm as the lesson from the Hebrew Bible for today. I did not plan on using the Genesis text for this sermon. That is, not until early last week when Keyla emailed me asking which Sunday School curriculum they were supposed to use for this week, and I checked and saw that it was to be Noah's Ark. Of course the scripture supplied by the lectionary has the happy ending: God establishing a covenant with Noah and his family plus all living creatures, and the promise that God will never again destroy the earth by flood, and look, see, a rainbow as a reminder of this covenant. The lectionary misses the earlier part when God saw the growing wickedness of humankind, and *felt sorry* for ever having made humankind. The lectionary misses the earlier part when God comes up with the genius idea of making a flood that will wash away **all** that is evil in the world, leaving behind only a remnant in the form of Noah and his family, and representative numbers of each living animal. God's wrath, destroying all but a handful of humanity, not to mention wreaking havoc on the environment: and we tell our children these stories? And some people *decorate* their children's nurseries with scenes from Noah's Ark?

Actually I remember loving the story of Noah's Ark as a child. It wasn't until I was older that I ever considered it problematic. As a kid I could easily identify with the protagonist, Noah. As an adult, I see enough selfish ways in myself that I realize I could have been one of the people who would have missed the boat-- and yet I worship this God? You see-- even my first reason for being uncomfortable with this story is the possibility that I could

be the bad guy-- not my remorse for all those other wicked ones who were drowned too, which is also pretty concerning.

Other trouble with the story is that archaeological and geological history fails to pinpoint a massive flood anywhere in Israel's history, however many of Israel's surrounding cultures had flood myths too, such as the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. Most likely, the Hebrews heard these flood myths from the cultures around them and spun their own version, imprinting their God and its values on it. *I do not tell you this in order to say that this story is not important.* There is meaning and truth still to be found in this story, so there is a scientific skepticism in your brain I want to give you permission to assure your inner nerd **"it's okay;** we're not forcing you to believe in the historicity of the flood; but let's look beyond the *facts* of the story and pay attention to what it is trying to say about humanity, and what it is trying to say about God."

Now let me tell you that my natural inclination is to trust in the inherent goodness of humanity. We were-- as Genesis tells us, after all-- made in the image of God. However, after last week, and the fact that it is layered over too many weeks like it in America, when the lives of innocent people-- schoolchildren and their teachers-- are turned to dust as violence charged in on their ordinary school routines, I am about as fed up as God was. I want a God of power and justice to cleanse the earth of people whose thirst for violence takes innocent lives. I want my daughter's school to be a safe ark where she can learn and grow. I want the forces of greed that value money over human life and dignity to be washed away. *Why can't God do that?*

The Genesis story is a failed example of God trying to set the world right by ridding it of evil. God failed because along with Noah's family and all those animals on their way to a new beginning, "something was smuggled on board with them, tucked away in their hearts, and that is the seed of

violence.”¹ I know that most of our historic confessions and creeds describe God as immutable, which means unchanging-- God as a perfect, all-knowing, constant, transcendent force above the rules of an evolving creation. But this Genesis story about the flood and its aftermath shows God differently, as getting involved in the mess of human frailty, trying to fix it, and instead becoming changed by it.

We can tell that God did not *fix* human tendencies towards evil with the flood. Only a few verses after God sets the rainbow in the sky, we see the dividing of tribal groups for slavery from Noah’s descendants. And yet, with the bow set in the sky God, made a covenant to never again destroy the earth; God makes this promise both with Noah and his descendents, and with “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” I wonder if God felt remorse for what God did. It certainly seems that God felt compassion for the works of God’s creation, both human and other animal creatures. As my friend who is also a Hebrew Bible scholar Robert Williamson says, “Having once put human beings solely in charge of creation (1:26–28) God now makes a commitment directly to the natural world. God’s special relationship with humankind now extends to all of creation. God is contractually obligated to us all.”²

So it is interesting that when Jesus goes to spend 40 days in the wilderness-- the same number of days God sent rain upon the earth in Noah’s time-- Mark’s gospel says that Jesus “was with the wild beasts.” Jesus’ entry into the wilderness comes right after his baptism by John, also a wild man, in the Jordan. The Jordan river, as we know, is a symbolic place; the Hebrews crossed it, beginning a new chapter after 40 years wandering in the wilderness; last week we saw Elijah ascend to heaven right after crossing the Jordan. Whereas the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before crossing the Jordan into the promised land,

¹ Kathryn Matthews quoting Martin Copenhaver in “First Sunday in Lent Year B,” *Sermon Seeds* Feb. 18, 2018

² Robert Williamson, “Justice for Lent: Creation Care (Genesis 9:8-17)”

Jesus *leaves* the Promised Land after being baptized in the Jordan and wanders for 40 days in the wilderness. There is something Jesus must learn there that cannot be learned in the Temple. It cannot be learned studying scripture. And it certainly cannot be learned by sitting at the feet of the Roman powers, which had occupied even the Jews living in Rome, controlling them under Herod's rule. Aliou Niang of Union Theological Seminary is from Senegal, and he describes that in his tribe, the way of attaining adulthood was not by graduating from college. It was not getting your first job. To become an man in his culture, he said, a boy must go into the wilderness, away from the nurture of parents, and survive the rhythms set by God and nature; not by man.

For Jesus, like the wild beasts, he spent his time hungering and searching. In doing so, he came to know our hunger, our searching. Like the wild beasts, he needed safe shelter from the sun and from the cold. He knows what it means to be unsafe. Sure, Jesus had angels waiting on him-- but what makes you think we don't too? And for each privilege the angels gave Jesus, Satan weighed upon him, trying to cause him to think and act upon his impulses for power and greed-- impulses we all reckon with. Everything Jesus experienced in the wilderness brought forth in Jesus a deeper solidarity with us, God's creatures, both animal and human.

You see, after painting a rainbow in the sky, God gave a message to God's created: "I will not give up on you. I will continue in faith and wild love for you to repair our relationship, and repair the world through love, not through destruction." In Jesus, God puts a body, adds flesh, to these words and symbols. This time God once again decided to get involved in the mess of human frailty-- but rather than fix it, through Jesus, God became human frailty, even to the point of death, so that no contour of human experience could be without God's knowledge of what it feels like.

Some people want, need, a God who will fix things. God tried that once, in the flood. Didn't work. Instead, God gave us Jesus. And not only that;

God also gave us our own wilderness time in these forty days of Lent. As we begin these 40 days, may we be formed as we turn out to form-- and by the power of Jesus Christ, re-form -- the world.

I end with a piece of this prayer which was used in our Ash Wednesday service last week:

Lord, in you I am transformed
and transformed still again.

When the discouraged cry for hope, **make me hope.**

When the hungry cry for bread, **make me bread.**

When the thirsty cry for water, **make me water.**

When the suffering cry for help, **make me help.**

When the sick cry for healing, **make me healing.**

When the bound cry for freedom, **make me freedom.**

When the outcasts cry for love, **make me love.**

Amen.