

Flooded for Faithfulness
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Lent 1B

Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15

We begin our 40 day journey through Lent with two things that happened over 40 days: the conclusion of the 40-day flood God wrought upon the earth, marked with God's rainbow across the sky as a covenant to Noah and his descendents that God will never destroy the earth by flood again; and then Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, when he is flooded by something else: his temptations and his vulnerability. Both these stories are like small arks that can help carry us through the 40 days of Lent.

I have to admit to you: I feel like I need an ark to get me through Lent this year. Can this season build for me something to keep me afloat, to keep me from drowning, and get me through to the dry land? A big part of me wanted to skip Lent this year. In one of my clergy discussion groups, one of my colleagues aptly pointed out: considering that the pandemic came upon us in the middle of Lent last year, it feels like we never actually left Lent. She's right in a way; last year, our theme for Lent was "Walking in the Dark." We were going to boldly explore the shadows, consider what might be life-giving in them, even embrace the darkness... and that was all fine and good as a temporary experiment. But after the 40 days was up, though we had experienced Easter's resurrection, the world was still turned upside-down, and shadows still loomed: we saw loved ones get sick and die; we continued to be kept at a distance from one another; we still haven't been together in a church. Must we really do Lent all over again?

But I mostly know better than to skip what our tradition offers us. And the reality is, I know my family and I have been relatively comfortable for most of the pandemic. And, perhaps most importantly, Lent is not just for me. Lent draws me into connection with a larger people, a larger experience, a larger story, and a larger God, so that we can see beyond the limits of our own perception, opening myself up to what God sees. And so, I will put on my big-girl wading boots and raincoat, and see what God has to show *us* this season of Lent.

There is a reason that God draws us again into the wilderness. There is a reason the lectionary asks us again to be drenched again with flood waters. Indeed, it's as if these times were trying to make this passage extra relevant: in addition to the natural disaster of a pandemic, we have seen the devastation in many parts of the country impacted by freezing temperatures upsetting the power grid; we've watched people melt snow and boil water so they can drink. Anyone with compassion can imagine the stinging chill of a freezing home; anyone who cares can feel their thirst.

I imagine Jesus, in the wilderness, with nothing else but the wanderings of his mind, found himself flooded with emotion: his fear. His hunger and thirst. His doubt. His awareness of his mortality. His loneliness, a deep longing to be among loved ones, to give and receive affection. The lures of his self-interest. His temptations, which were helped along by Satan's presence. He had enough time in the wilderness to feel these things fully, even to let them draw him near the edge. In that time, he probed the edginess of human experience and vulnerability. It stretched his compassion.

We have all had times when we were flooded to the edge with an emotion. In a traumatic event, the stress hormone cortisol pumps through our veins, inundating us with preparation to take flight, to fight, or to freeze. When we feel flooded with desire, our yearning takes over our bodies, occupies our daydreams, and directs our actions to put us in connection with the source of our attraction. When we are overcome with grief, tears explode, and in fact, their release also releases oxytocin and endorphins, which help reduce pain and restore us to a sense of well-being. When we are flooded with hunger, the emptiness rattles within us, and our mouth waters with the longing to taste whatever nourishing satisfaction comes next. The flood story in Genesis takes us to that edge, and right when we think we will never be taken back from that edge... God initiates a covenant, a way of return, producing a rainbow in the sky and promising never to flood the earth again. It is often when we feel we are at an ending, that God shows us there is yet more.

In Jesus' time in the wilderness, he touched again on that anguish, which is both so human and so holy.

One time, I was driving from the airport to attend a conference at the Presbyterian retreat center in Lake Tahoe. I was enjoying the winding roads and feasting my eyes on trees and vegetation that was so unique to what we see on the East coast, when suddenly traffic stopped. There was just one lane each way, and as my car inched forward, I saw what had stopped us. A man had been thrown from his motorcycle, and another biker was giving him chest compressions, and a third biker was directing traffic around them. I was instantly flooded with the memory of giving my own mother chest compressions when she had suffered a heart attack, which filled me with grief, concern, and compassion. Once I had passed the injured biker, I could move along speedily, and did so with hope that an ambulance would get to this man quickly. But just a mile further down the road, I saw another biker pulled over. He was kneeling on the ground, weeping. To be honest, a piece of me wanted no part of this trauma-- I had my own lingering experience with trauma, and they were starting to flood me again. My foot tapped between the gas and the brake. But I did pull over. I got out, and told the man that I am a pastor and asked if he needed help. "Yes!" he told me, "That's my brother who was thrown back there, and I don't know if he's alive. I can't go back there." His leather vest and armour of tattoos could not protect him as his sobs shook him; his long beard was soaked with his weeping.

I offered to pray for him, which he declined. But he did wipe his tears on his bandana, then replaced them just as quickly, as he got onto his bike and returned to the direction of his brother

and whatever state he would find him in. I'm not sure what happened to the brother, and wondered often about them that week as I kept them in prayer. I imagine he wished he could turn back even further, to moments before the accident, as if he could somehow play God and rewrite the history of what happened; I know I have found myself wishing I could do that at times.

Jesus announced, after his time in the wilderness, and after his friend John was arrested, "Repent, and believe the good news." In Greek, the word we translate as repent is *metanoia*, and it means "turn back!", or "change your mind!" In the story of Noah's flood, I wonder if it is in fact God, rather than humans, who had the experience of repentance. Genesis begins the flood narrative noting that, upon seeing how evil humans had become, "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created." These words are so sad and beautiful, as we imagine God flooded with emotion. Celia Sinclair notes, "This story is read rightly when it is understood as the story of God's grief. Too often, and wrongly, it has been told as a tale of punishment. But the narrative here should never be used as a model for divine judgment. What is central in the story is the anguish in the heart of God, which moves God to a new reality in relationship to the entire earth."

By the end of the flood story, God has changed God's mind, and through Noah decides to renew and restore humans and all creation together-- not just humans, but the birds, the animals, and all creation. If God can change for us, maybe we can change for God, too.

This Lent, I hope to embrace the spiritual practice of *metanoia*. I want God to change my mind, reframe my assumptions. I have been watching the PBS series "The Black Church" over these last days, and I very highly recommend it. One of the many things that stood out to me is that the religion that the slaveholders presented to those whom they enslaved focused on meek obedience and personal salvation. They withheld key passages of the bible so "the enslaved wouldn't be infected by their liberating messages" such as the liberation story of the Exodus, and New Testament passages that left out challenges to imperial power. But still, the suffering of the cross, Jesus' unjust persecution, resonated with enslaved persons. They saw themselves in the experience of the cross, and saw that Jesus identified with them: he was oppressed and put down like them, but he arose. He got up. That reframing of the religion of their oppressors flooded black Christians with power, adding a holy mandate for black resilience and resistance to oppression. They were able to rewrite the narrative given to them by their masters, and tell a new story that was in fact a very old story.

May this Lent make new for us something God gifted us that is very, very old.

The waters of baptism which immersed Jesus evoke for us all that water represents in the bible: the waters of the Red Sea, which parted so that the Hebrews could leave their enslavement and find a new freedom; the waters of creation, and of the flood that cleansed the earth. Amos's call that justice pour down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. When Jesus was baptized, Mark says the heavens were torn apart as the Spirit like a dove descended upon

Jesus. This is no gentle parting of the clouds. This is a rupture-- one commentator wondered if a wound was left in the sky after such a tear.

As this Lent makes its mark on us, may it be one that, transforms us, and carries us to see the completion of that which floods us. In our temptation, may we find satisfaction in God. In our grief, may we see the promise of rainbows. In our hunger, let Christ's meal feed us, that we may turn to feed others. In our loneliness, let baptism mark us as connected and belonging. May this journey make us more compassionate, more faithful, and may it surprise us with who we will become on the other side of it. Amen.