

A Journey to the Other Side of God

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

February 17-18, 2018

Lent 1

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

“I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.... When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” (Genesis 9:11-13,16)

Years ago, Ed and I bought our first house from an 88-year-old widow. She had lived in the house for more than fifty years. And, even though she and her husband added on a family room and a new garage, the wallpaper in the house remained unchanged. Their son’s bedroom still had “cowboys and Indians” wallpaper ... complete with guns and bows and arrows.

In a few years when we were getting ready for our own little boy, we changed out the wallpaper and redid the room with a Noah’s Ark theme. I remember back then my friends told me, you’ll never find wallpaper like that! And since we didn’t have Amazon to order from, I hauled my sizable self to stores until I found what I wanted. We did indeed have a Noah’s-Ark nursery. As I remember it, I still like it. The animals and rainbows made the space uplifting and peaceful. (Better than cowboys and Indians!)

As nice as our nursery was, the story of Noah and the Flood is much more than a sweet child’s story. It is Plan B for creation. The Rainbow is God’s reminder. A colorful, cosmic Post-it Note. God gave up on violence and hung the war bow where, as Genesis tells us, “I will see it and remember.” The Rainbow is a sign that God changed God’s own mind. “This destruction approach isn’t working.”

As it turned out, it wasn’t God’s style.

The long ago telling of the Flood and Rainbow is a story of God’s own repenting, *God’s changing for the sake of relationship*: from vindication to forgiveness, patience, and steadfast love for creation and for humanity.

The story was recorded by the people of Israel during the time of Exile. They had lived through a boatload of change and chaos: a loss of stable government, religious structure and practices. Everything familiar and meaningful was up for grabs.

The exilic people would have been comforted by a sign.

For the ancients, the bow was the archery weapon of the divine warrior. They thought of lightning as God’s arrows fired from a mighty bow. So the Rainbow became more than a sign of beauty after a storm, but God’s refusal to take up the divine bow against humanity.

God gives up divine power, for sake of relationship. God’s character is from hereon known as one who seeks restoration.

The Rainbow is a sign of hope and of new beginnings. And. We. Need. It.

We have our own chaos, in the world, our lives and in our own selves.

The season of Lent, our journey with Jesus to the cross, is a time to face the great imbalance. God's purpose and desire for a harmonious cosmos, verses great conflict within humanity.

What a terrible week we had! On Tuesday, Commander Paul Bauer was murdered in Chicago. On Wednesday, we remembered the tenth anniversary of the rampage at Northern Illinois University where on Feb 14, 2008, a gunman killed 5 students and wounded 17 others inside Cole Hall. We could barely remember them and honor their memories, when there was another mass shooting, with another 17 persons killed, with another semi automatic weapon, this time in a Florida high school. This is the same high school Anthony Rizzo graduated from. So did my nephew and niece. Chaos is close.

This is the same automatic weapon was used in Las Vegas; Newtown, Connecticut; Aurora, Colorado; and Sutherland Springs, Texas; among other sites of national carnage. Some say it is an excellent sporting rifle. Others say the only thing it is good for is killing other humans.

You have probably read and heard that in only 46 days in 2018 there were 18 shootings on school property. I read that more than 30,000 people are killed with guns in the U.S. every year, that guns kill more people than AIDS, and the same as car accidents and liver disease.

Dr. George Benjamin, the Executive Director for the American Public Health Association said, "Something has to change, because up until now, we have done everything we can to ensure this epidemic of death and disability from firearms is only going to get worse."

As despair grows, it can be tempting to give up. But we can't.

On February 8th, I attended a seminar presented by the Elgin Police Department on how to respond to an active shooter in a place of worship. It was really well done and informative. I plan to process the information I learned and pass it on to staff and leaders. Much has changed. We are not going to be in denial or unprepared. Neither will we let despair take hold.

We have to hang up our weapons.

Lent is a time we remember the God whose own heart was so grieved, that God gave up divine power, and hung up violence. Never again!

Together, we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We face our mortality, our finitude. Will we repent? Will we stop grasping for control, or will we continue in the violence?

This tense cosmic drama continues in our Gospel reading in Mark. Jesus comes out of the water, favored by God, enters a wilderness world inhabited by Satan, wild beasts, and angels. Mark says, "He was *with* the wild beasts." Will Jesus fall prey to nature's violent pattern? Or will he lead the angels, the earth, and even the wild beast in a return to primeval harmony? Will this Beloved One restore peacemaking humanity? (Workingpreacher.org page 30 for Lent 1, Year B)

So, in Lent we follow Jesus into the wilderness and face our own wild natures.

We have chaos in our own lives. Relationships that are broken or frayed by disagreement or distance, grief over losses, and dreams that have disappeared. We have disappointments that make us edgy. We have weapons that hurt others and ourselves. And we need to hang them up.

This Lent we are invited in the “40 bags in 40 days” challenge to clean out our closets, drawers, and cupboards. To clutter our lives. To get rid of what we don’t need, use or even like any more. We need the space. With the psalmist we pray, “Create in me a clean heart, O God.”

One of our favorite weapons, used with great frequency, even against the people we love the most is Criticism. In an article titled “Mission Critical,” Martha Beck writes, “If you’re constantly castigating friends and family, you may be overlooking a truly tragic flaw.” (*Oprah Magazine*, November 2017)

Most of us silently judge other people, at least occasionally. Some folks, however, don’t keep their judgment so silent, offering their opinion to every misguided soul they believe could benefit. Here is some feedback: One, our criticism is actually making things worse; Two, criticizing is hypocritical.

Criticizing family and friends wreaks havoc on trust and love. Psychologist John Gottman named criticism as the first of the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” The other three horsemen are contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. According to psychologists, our brains may interpret criticism as a threat to our survival, activating a fight or flight reflex. Your loved one is likely to lash out or run away instead of calmly listen to your advice.

If our loved ones seem fed up with our advice, we can change the direction of the concern and look at our own hearts and minds. We can remember that the only person we can control is ourselves.

Lent leads us to a time of introspection, with our own wild selves. How am I guilty of the thing I am criticizing? What drives me crazy about you tells me a lot about what I have to work on.

There is a spy technique called “walk back the cat.” It helps to retrace the chain of events to figure out how one thing led to another. If we, for example, get frustrated with and feel critical of a friend who whines and complains in detail, why is this? Why does this drive us crazy? Could it be that we remember when we were hurting or suffering in some way and no one seemed to notice or care? Is something left unhealed in our lives? Did we feel forgotten?

We can hang up the weapon of harsh criticism. It doesn’t work anyway.

And that includes criticizing ourselves.

Criticizing ourselves is just as counterproductive as attacking a loved one. When we “walk back the cat,” we may discover that we are in a wilderness of fear or pain. There are times when we are possessed by forces that defy God. Forces that leave us afraid and alone.

Lent leads us to notice that our suffering is real, and we can feel what we’ve been feeling. Dear people, you know this! But it helps to be reminded! **Kindness and acceptance begin with ourselves.** That’s one reason the order for confession and forgiveness is such a good way to begin our worship gathering! Confession and forgiveness help us hang up our weapon of criticism. Our hearts are softened for compassion.

Carl Jung said that most painful issues can’t be solved; they can only be outgrown. But that takes time and deep work.

But our culture says, Nah! Don’t bother! Go to eBay, Facebook, go shopping, play a video game, drink some wine, eat a bag of chips. Be sad and silent or aggressive and angry. You deserve it!

Ah, but the old story of the Rainbow, the reminder of the divine change of mind and heart, invites us to remember that ***in the midst of our chaos we are remembered***. The scary chaos of the world, the violence that threatens and frightens us, the chaos of our own lives that keep us from caring and growing does not have the last word.

Just as the Creator hung up the bow in the sky, and gave up power in order to have and be in relationship with humanity, we, too, can hang up our weapons. We can take a close and compassionate look at ourselves. We can ask for and receive forgiveness. And when we do, our words are no longer deadly arrows doing more harm than good.

Understanding ourselves makes us softer and more compassionate, which means others are more likely to listen to us.

Years ago, the exiled Hebrew people lived with the chaos of destruction and loss. The undrawn bow in the sky was a reminder to them that the God of creation was not their enemy and they had not been forgotten.

God remembered them. And would give them the resolve, the energy, and the leadership to begin life again.

And, so, God remembers us as people in a violent world. As people who are victims of our own sharp arrows of criticism and contempt. We are not forgotten.

Lent is a journey to the other side of God, to the vulnerability of a God who gives up power in order to love us, who embraces even death and leads us to a new place. Of possibility and peace.

So, we can sing this season...

“Change my heart, O God; make it ever true.
Change my heart, O God; may I be like you.”

Amen.

Resources:

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis Feasting on the Word* for Lent 1, year B
The Daily Herald editorial, “We cannot give up,” February 16, 2018
Oprah Magazine, November 2017, ‘Mission Critical’ by Martha Beck
David Lose, *workingpreacher.org* for Lent 1, 2018,
Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway*
NPR

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