



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 1 (B)

The Wilderness

[RCL] Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Wilderness, we have arrived. On this first Sunday of Lent, the texts thrust us quite suddenly into the wilderness. To start, there's the story of God's promise to Noah after the great flood. This is a beautiful passage of hope and promise, and what church nursery does not have a mural or painting of the animals lining up two by two to board the ark? But in this context, one cannot read it without the specter of diluvial destruction hanging over the passage. And speaking of specters, how about the epistle reading for today? We have Jesus preaching to spirits in prison from Noah's day—a statement no one is quite sure how to explain. And of course, from Mark's Gospel, we have the baptism of Jesus with the sky torn open, a heavenly voice, and then the Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness.

We've set the table. Now, where do we even begin?

The story of Noah and the great flood has many eyebrow-raising elements, not the least of which is a genocidal God. Whether or not the story is entirely a metaphor or has historical roots, the fact remains that the story includes a whole lot of people who are seemingly killed by God. Perhaps it is an anachronistic sensibility, but from our position in the 21st century, it seems unlikely that every single human would have done something deserving of death. In today's reading, we see the covenant with God, that God has set the bow in the heavens as a promise that God will not flood the entire earth again. But that still does not answer the question of why God killed all those people to begin with. How are we to make sense of this bit of hopeful promise without acknowledging and understanding the rest of the story?

We turn to the New Testament with hope for some guidance. In the reading from 1 Peter, there is little clarity gained. Instead, there is a reference to Jesus preaching to spirits in prison from Noah's day: Jesus "went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water." The commentaries are not extremely helpful in providing additional elucidation. There are three main schools of thought when it comes to who the spirits Jesus is preaching to may be.

The first theory is that Jesus descended to the underworld to preach to the souls of those who died in the flood. This would imply that there were souls stuck in a kind of limbo, awaiting the birth and death of Jesus. A second thought is that Jesus preached to Noah's contemporaries through Noah himself. The thinking goes that the Holy Spirit filled Noah and used him to preach Jesus' message to his living contemporaries. Still others speculate that the spirits in prison are fallen angels associated with the wickedness run rampant before the great flood. Each of these theories has its own subdivisions of interpretation and line of implications.

It may seem the 1 Peter reading has only added to our confusion. Fortunately, we still have Mark's Gospel to turn to. The text for the day begins with Jesus being baptized by John, the heavens torn apart, and a voice from heaven proclaiming, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Here is a baptism account that is fairly straightforward. "You are my Son, the Beloved." It's a passage about identity. It's a passage that showcases what theologians and philosophers call "ontology," or Jesus' nature of being. This is where Mark starts his story. Before the temptation in the wilderness, before healings, miracles, or preaching, Mark starts with this proclamation of identity. Jesus is the Son of God, the Beloved.

With this, we can begin to look backward at the other texts. We see the 1 Peter passage in a new light. Whichever way we choose to identify the mysterious "spirits in prison," the primary purpose of this passage is to point to Christ's identity. Jesus is the one who suffered. And Jesus is the one who has triumphed and now sits at the right hand of God. So, what does this mean for baptism?

It is interesting that the author of the epistle chooses to bring in the story of Noah and the flood as a prefiguring of baptism. It is a look backward. The flood was a disaster – whether it should be read as a literary metaphor or was based on a scientific event – the great flood was a devastating tragedy. Baptism is a look backward. It is a turn toward suffering, toward devastation, and even toward death. It is a look backward at the wilderness we have come from, not just individually but collectively, as well. As humanity, as a culture, as a religion, we have come from a truly wild place. We have suffered, and we have caused suffering.

While the analogy of the flood is a look backward, it is also a look forward to hope. There is a fundamental shift in humanity after the flood. There is an ontological change. These are people who have been saved. These are people who are beloved. No matter who they are or where they go from there, the fundamental part of their identity remains that they are people who have been rescued. Full stop.

Baptism, according to 1 Peter, is not a "removal of dirt from the body." No, it is a sign of a change of identity. It is a sign that we are rescued, cleansed, and made new. We are the Beloved. We may not understand the suffering that has occurred before. We may never know the why behind the flood or the who of the spirits in prison. But whichever way we read these passages, there are two points that come across as clear as day. Christ is with us. And Christ is for us.

The fundamental message from our text today is summed up in the collect: “Let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.” Jesus is mighty to save. And taking that one step further, Jesus is mighty to save each and every one of us. Jesus is mighty to save *you*. As the psalmist writes, God is “the God of my salvation.” The God who is God of the waters and the mighty floods descended into the depths and fullness of human suffering for us. Now, we find our identity in Christ. No matter the pain we’ve experienced, are experiencing, or will experience, Christ has been there, is there, and will be there.

And thus, as we enter into this season of Lent, we see the wilderness around us. We see the wilderness we’ve come from. And we know there’s still wilderness yet to come. But through it all, we hold onto our identity in Christ. The identity of God’s beloved that ever reminds us:

Christ is with you. Christ is for you. Amen.

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