

The Promises God Kept in Jesus Christ: The Promise of a Second Chance
Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’”

Have you ever wished that you could start over again? Wipe the slate clean? Erase the mistakes you have made? Leave the whole mess behind? The legendary story of Noah and the flood is the story of what happened when God started over again, wiped the slate clean, erased the mistakes made, and left the whole mess behind. This is God’s “do over,” the story of the second chance God gives to himself.

In the first creation story, you will remember, God pronounced each creature good. The verdict at the end of the second creation story? Not so good. Adam and Eve sin and are expelled from the Garden of Eden, we say on Christmas Eve to set the stage for our redemption. Then Cain murders Abel and so begets generations of jealousy, anger, violence, and greed. Ironically the subtitle in my Bible for the section following the story of Cain and Abel is “The Beginning of Civilization.” Really.

“It grieved God to the heart” the writer of Genesis tells us, this turn of human beings away from God’s purposes. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” “God is aware that something is deeply amiss in creation,” Walter Brueggemann writes. “God’s world has begun to conjure its own future quite apart from the future willed by God.” But unlike a normal parent grieving over her rebellious children, this almighty grief pushes God over the edge. God says, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry I have made them.” The analogy is the spouse whose second chance at marriage is predicated on the destruction of the

first.

Therefore the God whose almighty power had created life itself was now about to use that power in the service of death. "I will blot out...I will destroy...I will bring a flood," God says. Here, of course, the whole story could have ended with creation reversed, chaos reinstated and God returned to the community that God is, the love that God is in himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, world at an end. "But" the priestly writer adds, and in that minor conjunction, he speaks a major word that thrusts a toe in the door of creation's future, a foot in the mouth of God's judgment: "But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord."

What did the Lord see? At the outset, we know nothing about Noah save for this: he does as he is told. Contrary to Bill Cosby's midrash on the story, Noah questions neither the definition of a cubit nor the details of God's command. In fact, "Noah did all that God commanded him," cooperating with God's purpose and thereby, as we shall see, confounding God's resolve to quit the human race.

In addition to Noah, the ship's manifest reads, not coincidentally, like the first creation story, God stowing on board "every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind...two and two of all flesh in which there was breath of life." The very existence of the ark and all of its animals allows us to hope that God is not only a God who blots out, but is also a God who holds out the possibility of a second chance for us and for all of creation.

Still, what was God thinking when God bet his "do over" on Noah? Was Noah's willing of God's will due to a gene that would forever predispose the species toward God? Or given Noah's compliance, would God renege on human freedom, decide the second time around to trump free will with blind obedience? Or maybe God thought that Noah would be so grateful for the gift of life, in the face of so much death, that he would teach his children and they would

teach their children to live in relation to the God who gave them life.

One has only to read the rest of the Bible--or even the first few verses written on dry land after the flood--to know that things continued as they had been. According to Julian Barnes' stowaway woodworm in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, "Noah was the pick of a very bad bunch. As for his drinking, to tell you the truth, it was the Voyage that tipped him over the edge...that turned him into a soak....You could even argue, I suppose, that God drove Noah to drink. Perhaps that is why your scholars are so jumpy, so keen to separate the first Noah from the second: the consequences are awkward. But the story of the 'second' Noah—the drunkenness, the indecency, the capricious punishment of a dutiful son—well, it didn't come as a surprise to those of us who knew the 'first' Noah on the ark." Neither possibility thinking nor human actualization, Brueggemann says, can contain the hope toward which the Noah story turns.

Rather God alone is left as the character whose intentions are forever altered by the flood, and therein lies God's second chance. After every living creature, "in whose nostrils was the breath of life, dies," Noah and those who were with him in the ark are forgotten on the high seas for one hundred fifty more days. Though the rains had stopped, those days must have been days of darkness; days when no one on board knew what was ahead save a slow, stinking death; days when there was no word from the Lord nor land on the horizon.

Then we are told, for no apparent reason, the Lord remembered Noah, remembered the creature whose name means "out of the ground that the Lord cursed, this one shall comfort." Noah means comfort, the root of the word Isaiah used ("Comfort, comfort my people") to announce the end of the exile. The Noah story, it turns out, was a story told first in exile by a people who were desperate for a second chance. In a land where there was no word from the Lord, no homeland on the horizon, no hope of a future, they told themselves a story about the God whose second chance with creation was predicated not on the destruction of God's creatures

but on God's steadfast love for the world God had made. God remembered Noah, Genesis says, and with that, the tide turned, the waters subsided, the land appeared and God makes a promise: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done."

Because we are going to spend the season of Lent thinking about the promises God kept in Jesus Christ, we would do well on this first Sunday to pause and review what a promise is and does. When we communicate with each other, even if all we are doing is exchanging information or reporting on our current state of mind, the words we say to each other and the words we receive from each other have the effect of posing a future. Most of the time the future is posed as an obligation or demand. If you do such-and-such, then this will follow. There are conditions placed on the future, conditions that oblige me to do some particular something or other to secure that future.

But the second and exceptional way we pose a future involves the language of promise. To promise is to pose the future as a gift. "A promise goes: 'Because I will do such-and-such, you may await such-and-such.' [We have talked about this before.] The pattern," Robert Jenson says, "is 'because...therefore...,' the exact opposite of 'if...then...'. Here a future is opened independent of any prior condition, independent of what the addressee of the promise may do or be beforehand. Indeed, we may say that whereas other communication makes the future dependent upon the past, a promise makes the past depend on the future, for it grants a future free from the past, and so allows us to appropriate the past in a new way."

This was God's first promise, made in the same breath that God acknowledged our ongoing evil inclinations, made by a God who, because he promised not to destroy us, was therefore more vulnerable than ever to our refusal of God's love and our rejection. On one hand, this explains a lot, explains God's self-limitation. "How can an all-powerful God allow such

evil?" we cry. This story tells us that, given a second chance, God unconditionally relinquished the power that is the power to destroy. On the other hand, the promise begs the question of what God *will do* about the evil inclinations of the human heart. If God's promise has rendered God powerless and vulnerable to creatures like us-who continually do everything we can do under the sun to keep from living in relation to the God for whom we were made, sometimes with disastrous consequences-how will God overcome evil and death without breaking God's promise?

This is how, according to Mark: in utter powerlessness and vulnerability, Jesus came preaching good news, revealing the God who, in self-limitation, had promised never again to destroy us. *This* God Jesus made manifest in the second chances he gave to the sick and the possessed, to the sinners and the outcasts, to the hungry and the hopeless, to the dying and the dead. In story after story, Mark show us God's reign coming near in such a way that God, in his Son, with whom he was well pleased, encountered those who had not met the conditions of Rome's future or religion's future, and, in Jesus, God gave them the gift of a future that no longer depended on the past.

Suddenly it hit me that the heart of God's promise never again to cut off God's creatures was, first of all, the promise of forgiveness. The radical and unique nature of Israel's God was and is that, though God would punish them, God would continue to take a second chance on them; the radical and unique nature of the same God we know in Jesus Christ is that God continues to take a second chance on us.

But God's promise sealed in a rainbow portends more! For if, in this life, forgiveness is the heart of God's promise never again to destroy God's creatures, what of God's promise in the face of death? When we make promises to one another, the unspoken condition is death, because you and I can pose no future beyond the grave for those we love. But because God has promised

never again to destroy us, therefore we may expect God to destroy death itself. Not by some murderous cosmic battle foreshadowed in the evil of apocalyptic fundamentalists, but rather in the death and resurrection of God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God was well pleased. Because he who was dead is alive forevermore, we may expect that not even death will separate us from God's love. I cannot prove this to you. I can only say the gospel, say that the God who promised never again to blot out human life is the God who kept the promise he made to Noah in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.