

“SOLITARY CONFINEMENT”
Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; Mark 1:9-15
March 5, 2006
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My sermon title for today is really all about projection - that is, what *I* am projecting upon the text. I say this because although our lectionary texts include nothing but good news, I'm convinced that some pretty important pieces have been left out of these stories. Perhaps I am wrong, but today I want to take a little “behind the scenes tour” into the flood narrative and into the life of Jesus as he begins his ministry. Solitary confinement is admittedly an ominous title; but in reading the texts and interacting with a whole slew of commentaries, the picture seems a bit too rosy. In our texts, both Noah and Jesus find themselves alone and, at some moment, I think they had to perceive themselves as being endangered and put there by God! Yet there is never really a moment of doubt, terror, or frustration that seeps into these biblical accounts of these amazing circumstances. Solitary confinement immediately brings up thoughts of punishment and desolation - thoughts and themes with which I am quite sure Noah and Jesus were acquainted. And that is the back story I want to explore today: What do Noah and Jesus offer to us in our moments of doubt and darkness, our solitary confinement?

Let us begin with the texts. In this first week in Lent, we always return to the early stories of the Hebrew Bible to seek out the ways in which God's presence is constant throughout history. Last year we read the creation narrative. This year we read of the covenant that God authored with Noah and all creation in the aftermath of the unrelenting flood that drove Noah and his family into the ark. Now I must tell you, I love the flood epic in Genesis. Whenever Noah is mentioned, I am instantly transported back to my childhood church school classes where we learned about cubits and the animals by “twosie-twosies, elephants and kangaroosies.” I love this story because in it God makes a covenant with all of creation: a reality that gives solid rationale for a Christian environmental movement. I love it also because it provides me an opportunity to be surprised by God in the colors of those all too rarely seen rainbows. Finally, I love it because of the stuff I throw into the story myself.

One of the things I have always assumed is that Noah had at least a few questions about this whole ark thing. Our scriptures paint Noah as the faithful one, but I really don't think it is a stretch to think he rolled his eyes at least once when God suggested he build an ark. Although Noah's family was spared by God, I am sure some of those neighbors were important to him, and it is thus difficult to turn his back on them. Mostly though, what I always insert into this story is that part of human nature that allows deep or foreboding thoughts to consume us. Where was Noah's fear in all this? All this talk of covenant is wonderful, but wasn't there at least a moment or two where Noah looked out of the ark into the nothingness only to be consumed by anguish? Didn't he awaken with a start at least once, concerned that God might choose to strike him down also? Was Noah just some sort or robotic puppet for God, moving along the deck of the ark with stiff arms barking out monotone orders to his family? Wasn't

there some measure of fear welling up inside of him? I know that our reading fills us with the Good News of God's rainbow covenant, but I suspect that at some point Noah was consumed with fear. But we don't read about that part of Noah's experience.

And then we have the gospel reading. This gospel reading from Mark skips merrily along, doesn't it? Just a bare bones approach to storytelling. I often view the writing of Mark as refreshing because it doesn't get bogged down in detail; but here it seems that Mark is in a big hurry to get onto the "important parts" in the life of Jesus. First we have the baptism of Jesus, complete with God's voice booming from on high. Now I know that Jesus is the savior, but neither Mark nor any of the other gospel writers have Jesus even reacting to God's words. Are we to believe that he isn't at least mildly surprised by God's voice echoing from the heavens: "You are my son, the beloved"? If that were me, I'm outta there - and fast!

But wait, there is more. Because once God's happiness with Jesus has been announced, the Spirit gathers him up and deposits him in the wilderness for 40 days of fun and games with Satan and the wild beasts. Where is the chorus of angels or some sort of reception for the Holy One? Nothing! Just the spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness. Imagine that whirlwind of activity for Jesus: baptism, hearing the voice of God, and then finding himself alone in the wilderness for who knows what! "Welcome my son; remember, I am pleased with you: now enjoy your forty days!"

The image I have in my head is even more sinister, because as I read this passage I get stuck in contemporary times and images. "And the spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." More than once I have pictured Jesus and a dark, ominous-looking spirit, sharing the front bench seat of a huge, darkly painted 1960's Ford Thunderbird. Jesus is plastered against the door of the passenger side, and as they drive down a winding highway on a dark night, the Spirit is telling Jesus of what is yet to come - and laughing that horrible "wa ha ha ha" laugh. Too many movies, I guess.

But even without the winding highway, there had to be fear or doubt or questioning, right? Just as I believe Noah had doubts as he floated, I also think Jesus had his moments in the desert in those forty days; and I am disappointed that the existence of these doubts isn't raised in our Bible. Prolonged personal struggle is often referred to as "the dark night of the soul"; and this is exactly what I think Noah and Jesus lived through during their "wilderness moments," riding the flood waters and living in the desert with Satan. In the end, both of these passages bring good news: for Noah, the Good News is of God's covenant; and for Jesus it is the proclamation that the kingdom of God has come. Yet, for all the Good News, what we do not have is a blueprint for how to live through our own dark nights of the soul; and these, my friends, are many.

For us, these dark nights take many forms. They are those times when the realities of life leave you convinced there is virtually no way you will survive. The idea of the dark night of the soul comes from the writing of the 16th century Roman Catholic mystic St. John of the

Cross; it is meant to describe a prolonged absence of hope and light. For some people these dark nights are moments of extreme sadness; moments when there is nothing apparent except for the shadow side; moments where doubt and despair conspire to overwhelm a normally able-bodied person. For others, the dark nights are moments of frustration: when the realities of our own making or those thrust upon us make it feel as though there is nowhere to look where people aren't lining up against us. For still others, the darkest moments come from memories of people lost to us: lost due to illness or death, lost due to broken relationships, lost due to the need to stay clear and create healthy boundaries. For whatever reason, darkness comes in mourning those lost to us. Perhaps, still, the dark night comes from addiction and the mounting toll of the damage caused by a seemingly uncontrollable urge to consume that which ultimately controls us. Perhaps there are words or actions that haunt us in ways that no one else understands; but at 3 a.m., those few words echo in our hearts and heads with unbelievable crispness. The dark night of the soul: it may take the shape of something I have described here, or it may present itself due to some other situation. However we describe its origins, I am sure that most - if not all of us - have confronted those moments in our lives that echo in our hearts because of the depth of their darkness. Likewise, I am sure that both Noah and Jesus experienced those moments in their isolation yet all we are shown is their strength and the Good News. And so, as we sit next to each other in the pew, following dutifully after our models of faith, we keep quiet when our dark nights of the soul have haunted us, perhaps as recently as last evening.

And that is the problem with Noah and Jesus. Our Bibles paint them as so unbelievably strong; and as much as I want to follow them, I'm just not that strong. What's more, I don't believe any of us is. Personally, most of my dark nights have come from trying to overcome that year of academic failure; from trying to find my faith during seminary after profound loss; and from trying to find language to mourn in the aftermath of my grandfather's death. Looking back on those events, I am still not sure how I survived them - physically or emotionally. But I do know that what I did was try to survive them alone. And that was absurd; for I wasn't thrust out into the desert or left floating in an ark. My closest friends and family members did not know the depths of my suffering. Many people asked me, "How are you?" And I would answer with the socially acceptable, "I'm fine." Next question please.

In the aftermath of struggle, I have watched as people come out of the woodwork and admit they saw the struggle, but they didn't know how to intercede. The reality is that our "I'm fine" statements are not really that convincing; but what they do accomplish is to push people away. And, thus, we end up in moments of solitary confinement, largely of our own making. God is still there with us, yet it feels like we don't have anyone to talk to. And that is where we are different from Noah and Jesus: we have people and community to walk with us during our dark nights.

All that covenant language is good and important; so, too, is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But what I see in Noah and Jesus are reality checks for community. Contrary to Jesus, we have a choice: God is not placing us in the desert where we are destined to thrash around and

struggle through it all by ourselves. Instead, the same covenant that brought Good News to Noah and all of creation, and the same God that sustained Jesus through his forty days in the desert stands by us and offers us sustenance. I'm not talking about evening prayers and our other almost desperate motions that we make toward God in our darkest hours. What I'm talking about is the community of friends and loved ones who gather around us. I'm talking about co-workers and mentors, friends from college, and next door neighbors. Genesis tells us of God's words, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth." As I think about Noah and his confinement on the ark, I understand this covenant to be about more than a rainbow. In my mind, this covenant is about community - that God will never cast us out into solitary confinement. And that IS good news - and it requires some action, some willingness to both give and receive the good news of covenant. It means being willing to risk a bit and acknowledge to each other when we are in the midst of our dark nights. It also means asking if "I'm fine" is real, and waiting to hear the answer. God's covenant with the people and the Good News of Jesus are wonderful, but they remain mere concepts if we don't have the courage to live them. The end of the flood epic and the beginning of the ministry of Jesus call us out of our solitary confinement and into the open where we can be fully known to God and to each other - fully welcomed into the covenant community that God has promised. Thanks be to God.