

“WHAT’S IN THE WATER?”
Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15
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It quenches our thirst on a hot day, it protects us before we are born, it falls from the sky and flows across the land in rivers and streams, we freeze it so we can skate upon it, it is a source of summertime fun, it is necessary to make our food crops grow, it is a resource that is becoming more and more valuable as it becomes scarce and polluted, we wash our hands with it, and in this space we follow the model of Jesus and use water to baptize and welcome people into our faith and our faith community. Water is everywhere, and not just because we live in the Willamette Valley. As we gather for worship on this first Sunday in Lent, water is the crucial element in our scripture lessons; our faith story it seems, emerges from the waters.

Our scripture lessons this week come largely in the form of Holy announcements. In the Genesis text we find the announcement of the bible’s first covenant and in the reading from Mark’s gospel we find a rapid-fire sequence that first announces God’s pleasure and love for Jesus after his baptism and then Jesus himself, after the desert temptations, announces the coming of kingdom of God and thus begins his ministry. We are just days past Ash Wednesday and perhaps you too can still “feel” the Ashen cross upon your forehead and that is probably a good thing during this holy season. But our readings offer something that might just wash away the remnants of Wednesday’s ashen cross because amid everything that is going on in our stories they are stories that once again call us into the water.

The verses we heard from Genesis bring the flood narrative to a close. In these verses the salvation work by Noah and his family has been completed and now God is responding to all that Noah and his family did in the role as “DS”—as the “designated survivors” of God’s anger and frustration. The flood has long since receded, the Ark is empty, the physical evidence of God un-creating the world, of God destroying Eden, is no more. But for Noah, and for readers across the history of this narrative alike, there is undoubtedly a residual amount of psychic fear and trembling left from the memory of God’s destructive anger. Our bible tells this story as if the flood is merely “God’s Plan B,” but that doesn’t erase the damage that this parent has inflicted upon creation. And, thus, it is a critical and faith-confirming step that God takes by announcing that the divine hand will never again flood the earth in anger. But if I were Noah and I had witnessed the destructive hand of God wiping out my friends and neighbors, then God’s word might not have been enough. And that is why the creation of a covenant is so critical here, because at least a little part of Noah had to be wondering when he would cross the line and end up in God’s not quite sea-worthy dog house.

And so God authors for Noah, and for all of humankind, a covenant. This covenant is unlike any others we see in the bible because this covenant is one-sided—it is from God, with responsibility only on God’s side. “I covenant with you that a flood will never destroy the earth again.” As a marker of this covenant God chooses a rainbow to give

Noah and the rest of creation a sense of security. We know that the rainbow is “an optical and meteorological phenomenon that causes a spectrum of light to appear in the sky when the sun shines onto droplets of moisture in the Earth’s atmosphere.” Even in those ancient days Noah probably knew something about rainbows, he undoubtedly had seen them before, but here God inscribes the rainbow with new meaning—making it a Holy symbol from that moment forward. God’s use of the rainbow as the reminder of this covenant allows Noah and his descendants to find a bit of calm when the rains inevitably return. With the promise of the rainbow the neighborhood conversation probably went something like this: “It looks bad, sure, but just wait there is the rainbow coming and then you too will know that God’s word is true.” Now, our contemporary interpretations tell us that the “great flood” was probably a regional flood that was interpreted by the Hebrew people as God’s anger and thus became a teaching tool, but no matter how we interpret this story the ending is quite remarkable. The ending is one of new life emerging from the water. This covenant story has life emerging in much the same way as the creation stories tell of life emerging from the primordial ooze, but this time life emerges from the muddy ooze of God’s anger. (I love the ooze—it just sounds theological.) Something was in the water, or more appropriately we could say something was left when the water went away, and that something was the promise that the violent death that Noah and his family witnessed would never again be required. That something was encapsulated in a rainbow covenant that said God was more interested in life than death, that God valued relationship over power, that as the muddy land became fertile soil the Holy relationship between God and humankind was ready to be re-created on the newly solid ground.

As Christians we find the re-creation continuing in the Gospels. Our gospel reading speaks profoundly about the future of humankind, and again the announcements we find here emerge from the water. First, as Jesus comes up from the waters of the Jordan river God’s voice can be heard to say, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” This announcement singles out Jesus as “the one,” making the expectations laid by God upon the shoulders of Jesus abundantly clear. While I am quick to think of the enormity of responsibility that God has just thrust upon Jesus with this announcement, Mark depicts Jesus as being virtually unfazed by his responsibility. The one with whom God is well pleased seemingly doesn’t balk at forty days in the desert; he doesn’t balk when Satan accompanies him; and doesn’t ask questions when the wild beasts AND the angels surround him. Nothing it seems, fazes Jesus; and, in fact, it was this announcement of God’s favor that I surmise provided Jesus the strength to make his own announcement, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” And, thus, Jesus begins his ministry. Mark’s gospel tells us that with the baptism of Jesus an avalanche of activity happened; something had to be in the water that helped Jesus understand and accept his call?

In Mark’s gospel, the story continues with Jesus calling his first disciples; but that part of the story will come soon enough. Today, as we gather on this first Sunday in Lent, I want us to focus on what has emerged from the water in both of these stories and how that informs our Lenten journeys. We are just a few days into Lent and as we mark this season in the public and private ways that we do we are joining Jesus in the desert,

joining him in a time of reflection and prayer that we hope will bring new meaning to our celebrations that will come when Jesus next emerges from the ooze—this time from the ooze of betrayal and death.

In our Lenten observances we should not however be overwhelmed with guilt or sadness for what happened to Jesus. Instead, I am convinced that we should be overwhelmed by the grace of our lives and the simplicity of God's presence with us and that is why we begin Lent with these texts this week. God's covenant that announced that the waters would never again overwhelm creation and the announcement of divine pleasure as Jesus is baptized are words of promise that should make our Lenten journey easier because they set us up for the grace-filled existence that was made known to us in our baptism. Our baptism—when we felt the water as an infant, teen, or adult, has us dripping with the same waters that once flooded the earth—but this time the waters are a source of unity and welcome—a source of sustenance and as always, the waters of baptism are a reminder of Holy covenant.

And so, as we join Jesus in the desert during Lent and, especially as we gather today to share a meal at Christ's table, I invite you to remember your baptism—to remember that in this Holy ritual you were uniquely held and uniquely called by your community into the mystery of God's love. Over and over again God makes that announcement to the beloved children, and God made (and continues to make) that announcement about you and about me and about each and every one of us who seeks to follow Christ's example. But too often we forget that God's promise is for us. We are more than happy to acknowledge that it existed in ancient days with Noah; clearly it existed for Jesus we can say that, and there are others out there too, those saints and leaders we look up to and follow. But too often we forget, or we just can't see our way to admitting, that God's promise is for us too—in our flailing about, in our angry moments, in our doubts, in our “Oh, so human” moments. And because we forget, because we deny our holiness, I believe we need to return to the water, to touch it once again, to remember that Holy covenant that God offered just for us when we were baptized. We return over and over to Christ's table to celebrate, so why shouldn't we return to the waters of our baptism to celebrate that we, each of us, were once and remain uniquely called by God.

So today I invite you to do just that: as you leave worship there is a fountain by the narthex door; stop by this visible symbol of God's love bubbling to the surface, and touch the water. And as you do, remember that in your baptism you were pronounced “part of the family,” and you were pronounced God's beloved child. God's love is still emerging from the waters of our baptism; touch the Holy water and be renewed during this Holy season.

Thanks be to God! Amen.