

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

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1st Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2009

Genesis 9:8-17

8Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11I 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." 12God 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: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16When 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." 17God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

1 Peter 3:18-22

18For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who 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 people, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Mark 1:9-15

9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

"The Rainbow Story"

Story One – Part One

“I Heard the Owl Call My Name,” by Margaret Craven is a novella that I love. It is the story of a Bishop who learns from the Doctor of his young ordinand that the ordinand has only three years to live. The Bishop and the Doctor cut a deal that the Bishop will be the one to tell the young man of his future.

Instead of telling him the Bishop sends the ordinand off to the most difficult parish of all because he has such a short time. He sends him off to do ministry to the native people in the upper Pacific Northwest. There he will live among the native people and serve as their vicar.

The story unfolds as the young upstart begins his ministry—thinking that he knows all about the church, people, and well life too. He is filled with youth and energy. He has this drive to give the people all his wealth of knowledge that he has in store.

It is the most difficult parish—spread out over rough terrain and untamed wilderness. These native people do not act like the folks he is accustomed to in the church and the “real world.” They follow their own schedule, they do their own thing, and are focused on things completely different from that which calls the young vicar.

He’s there to teach them, but they are not teachable.

Story Two – Part One

The traditional First Sunday in Lent lectionary text is the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Mark’s gospel, which is the gospel of focus for this year in the lectionary cycle, does not contain the kind of detail that we find in Matthew. There is no story of a temptation to turn stones to bread and there is no pinnacle of the temple throwing oneself down—none of it in Mark’s gospel.

Instead we get in classic Markan fashion a quick snapshot. His view of things begins with a review of the baptism—the voice—“My beloved in whom I am well pleased.” Just last week in the Transfiguration there was that same voice—“The Beloved, listen to him.”

So here we are and Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he is tempted. The only details Mark gives us is that he was with the wild beasts and the angels attended to him.

It is a strange detail for Mark to include. I could see it if this was Matthew. Matthew loves details and loves that way of seeing Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. This is after all a wonderful view of the peaceable kingdom. That prophecy of Isaiah where the lion and lamb lie down together—ah, but this is Mark and not Matthew.

Why the detail of wild beasts? Oh we do face them. For a practical matter this is the wilderness. Even now, and even here—we are in the wilderness. And it is not free of the beasts.

Hey, we live right there in the wilderness—not so much with the lions, tigers, and bears, but culturally we live in the wilderness where everyday we stare in the face of that which feels untamed, strange, not at home, unsafe, scary, shifting, and wearing away. We face off with those wild beasts every single day of our lives.

Story Three – Part One

Jill is just meeting Illanya for the first time. And Illanya says to Jill, “I know who you are.” “I know who you are.” But neither one has met the other before or shared a conversation—but Illanya is able to look inside of Jill and know her.

Understand some things: Jill is a mess. She is 40 years old and she has never been on a date. She has never had any kind of a relationship

with a man. She is living with her mother. She has been fired from her job. She has never felt good enough, smart enough, or pretty enough.

She has never met her father. She is over-weight and out of options. She got poor self-esteem, bad self-image, she lacks confidence—she can't say who she really is at her core. She is out of touch with the core of her being.

Story Four – Part One

There they are 40 days after the deluge—after the rain. It is after this rain and flood that there comes this wonderful scene of promise. Then and there God makes the vow—he made it to Noah and his sons and to all the wild animals and to all those who will come after him—the promise is that such a great flood will never happen again.

Yes, oh yes, but it is more than that. It is more than flood insurance. The promise is bigger than that. It is covenant. It is a seal of God's story on our lives.

It is a covenant between God and Noah and all his descendents and their descendents and the descendents of the descendents. We are Noah's descendents.

And God puts up the bow—the rainbow in the sky. It is a symbol of that promise there in the sky about the covenant relationship between God and us.

Story One – Part Two

You probably can guess the end of the story about the young vicar. He dies there in the midst of his first parish. But along the way—in those very few short year a lot of living happens. In those two good years that felt like difficult ones, the fullness of life is truly experienced.

In that time he is acquainted with the land and the wilderness. He meets in the people and in their way of discerning things a way and an understanding that is in tune with nature and out of touch with anything he has ever encountered.

He goes into the experience thinking it is about what he has for them. But along the way he realizes they have something to teach him about himself.

The people. The land. The wild animals. The owl. The water. It all has something to stay. It all has a story that it tells him about who he is.

He dies with an understanding of who he is. And that understanding is not formed by being alone in his mind—it is forged—that understanding, that identity is forged in being alive with those people in that place.

He dies with an understanding of who he is. His identity is cemented and connected with the whole of creation—even in the sound of the owl he can hear his own name—he find himself when he finds his relationship to all those who surround him—that is the forging of his identity.

Story Two – Part Two

“...and he was with the wild beasts.”

He faced it all—not so much the snarling tigers or the poisonous snakes—he faced all that which would enter our lives and would scare us off. He looked it in the face there in the wilderness and was not consumed by it all.

That wild beast of self and that surreal wild beast of a world we live in—he faced it down and faced it off and emerged from the wilderness. He emerged from that wilderness with a clarity of identity.

That is the point that Marks makes. In his baptism there is a clear moment of identity – “You are my son, the Beloved.” That is immediately before the wilderness temptation, and right after it is there clear statement of Jesus that the time has come and the kingdom is fulfilled.

His identity is clear—on the high mountain of Transfiguration and at the moment of baptism—but also as he comes face to face with the wilderness—that identity—his story—it is firm and clear and present and real—it is there: God’s Son. Kingdom of God fulfilled.

Story Three – Part Two

Jill is the epitome of us and of the world.

Oh, she worked through her issues. She beautifully worked through all her baggage. She even made contact with her father and has tried dating. Her inner person is coming through.

Illanya reminded her – “remember the first day that I met you and I told you I knew who you were. I knew.”

Sometimes we do not even know who we are. Sometimes we get lost in all the living we do. Sometimes we are unsure of who we really are. The world blames it all on self-image or lack of self-confidence. But,...the real issue is we lose sight of the source of our image. Our image is holy. Created in God’s image. Our image is holy—hold onto that image. You are holy; you are the saints of God.

We lose sight of the reality that there is no such thing as self-confidence—at least there should not be. All our confidence should be in God’s ability to work in us and through us and sometimes even in spite of us.

When we are confident in God's steadfastness—oh then those wild beasts within—conquered and crowded out by love. When we are confident in God's steadfastness—oh that rainbow story is our story.

Story Four – Part Two

Did you notice the detail in the Biblical text? Did you pick that up about the rainbow? It's a symbol of promise. It is a symbol of promise that God will remember. It was not put there in the sky for us—yes we get to behold it—but it was put there as a symbol for God—God will remember.

God will remember that God's promise of love and covenant are with us—for us, and imputed on us.

God will be remembering us—God knows our identity—even when we forget. God know our identity. When we are on top of the world and so sure of ourselves—and when we are in the wilderness staring in the face of terror—God remember who we are—it is the rainbow story.

And God puts a sign on us – that we can remember too. Water Baptism—it is the rainbow. Oh that remembering. Such a one. Such a promise—that it takes on flesh and goes all the way to the cross for us—long after the world would forget or deny God remembers---remembers us, remembers me, remembers you, remembers us together.

We can stare down the wild beasts in the world and those within us. We can look to the sky and see the storm clouds gather and disperse. We can glimpse the rainbow. We can remember that the waters have washed over us. We can know and confide in the reality that even when we lose our way God's way in us is not lost. God's made a promise over us. God remembers – that's the whole story. Amen.