

## **Readings and Sermon for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent**

**26<sup>th</sup> February 2012**

### **Genesis 9:8-17**

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and 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. I 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.'

God 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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I 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. When 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.' God 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 Pet 3:18-22**

For 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, in which also he 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 people, were saved through water. And 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, who 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**

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

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

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.'

## The Sermon

I wonder how you're feeling this morning, first Sunday in Lent. Have you set your Lenten disciplines, decided what you're offering to God in abstinence or additional piety, feeling guilty that you've broken it already, smug or relieved that so far you've kept to it, bothered that you've not decided anything yet, doubtful about the value of these self-restraining disciplines, not decided or not begun yet - or just not bothered??

Of the general population, over 20 % of people surveyed just before the beginning of Lent were planning some form of discipline, though not all had decided what. If we take the 18-30 age group, **over 30%** had plans. Let's note that!

In the job I had until a couple of years ago or so, each year nearly all the section staff would discuss their Lenten disciplines, whether they were religious people or not. They saw the activity as important, a chance to share in a few weeks of discipline and self-awareness in the company of others, something which somehow was linking them into something far greater.

The company of others. . . . . linking into something far greater. . . . .

God is a God of fellowship and hospitality, and the God who meets us and spends time with us, in our feasting and in our fasting.

In the days of Noah, he destroyed all who blatantly refused that fellowship and hospitality, after making a dramatic and prophetic statement through Noah's obedience. And Noah had a pretty searching time to go through himself:-

Building the ark, a huge construction; an unspecified time filling it with living creatures; 40 days and nights of torrential rain; another 5 months on flood waters without visible land; more time waiting for the waters to dissipate till

the raven and then doves were sent out, months for the land to dry, until finally **after over a year in the ark** they disembarked without danger.

A testing time? A tough Lent for so long??

Sometimes I let my imagination enter that story (imaginative contemplation is a good and Godly way for us to grow in prayer) and I wonder what the relationships in that huge boat were like, what it smelt like, what they ate, how they kept the place clean. And more than that, how did they feel tossed in danger, through the 40 days and nights of relentless tempest and then brought to voyaging in safety, yet with no clear future. For months on end.

In amongst the practicalities of managing their large menagerie, there must still have been a lot of time to stare out at the waters around them, the sky above - and be still before the awesomeness of this God who had saved them. Yet for what? They must have had sober thoughts as they realised their previous world truly had been wiped out, time to think about how they had become infected by the destructive and faithless attitudes around them, time for inner cleansing as their visible physical world was being washed clean.

I'm sure to that they pondered God's love for them – for THEM! That's awesome to stop and realise that, for each of us individually, whatever the blessing even through strange times, this is God doing this for ME, showing his love to ME.

And now, at this point in the narrative, after a year in the ark and finally on dry land – here is God's promise! Listen to all God promises.

God said, **'As for me, I am establishing my covenant . . .**

**I establish my covenant with you,**

God 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:**<sup>13</sup>

**I have set my bow in the clouds,** and it shall be a sign of the **covenant between me and the earth.**

**When I bring clouds over the earth** and the bow is seen in the clouds, **I will remember my covenant . . .**

**When 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.'**

**God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'**

In these few verses, God repeats himself **7 times** about the covenant between himself and every living creature on earth, and the rainbow sign which seals the covenant— this is very important business to be said so repeatedly!

Each of those actions comes from God, without any demands on those with whom he is making the covenant. Most covenants require both sides to be party to the agreement. But here, this is **God only** – reaching out unconditionally with his promise to human beings, animals and all the living creatures that were saved in the ark. And for all future generations! That means that each of us is still included in that covenant.

And the rainbow is more than just a pretty physical phenomenon, because the Hebrew word for bow is that used for the bow with an arrow. So when God sees the bow he creates, he is telling us that his bow is for our protection, not our destruction.

We have a generous God! Our God is a God of fellowship and hospitality, a God who wants to share with us.

So whatever God gives in his love and blessing 'to ME', he is giving that unconditional love too to all around me.

And - for each one of us - he may choose ME to be the one to live towards others in that generous way, through what he gives me.

Even this week's prayer, the Collect, picks up that theme of our action coming out of what God does for us .

**give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;  
and, as you know our weakness,  
so may we know your power to save;**

Grace – from God, so that we can be obedient to his Spirit, that same spirit that was poured on Jesus at his baptism with God's declaration of his love and delight for his son; and God's power to save us from our weaknesses – the same power that raised Jesus from the dead!

Our Lent studies with the Methodist Mission, both here and at the Mission, and in house-groups in both churches, are exploring the theme of hospitality and how hospitability is both an expression of God's love to us, and also a way of drawing us

and others deeper into God's hospitality. ***The hospitality that embraces us in God's covenant of the rainbow, and even more so in the covenant of salvation in his Son Jesus.***

Time to let God take us on that exploration into more of his Love? We may have some strange sailing to do, and within it we can be sure that whatever the strangeness of the voyage, God truly is promising us the deeper and greater generosity of the gift of Himself.

### Further References

#### 1. Bible Readings

*The New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition)*, copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the [National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America](#)

#### 2. For more details on the Lent survey see

[http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2012/02/one-in-three-planning-to-observe-lent-don't-know-what-to-give-\(or-take\)-up-survey-finds](http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2012/02/one-in-three-planning-to-observe-lent-don't-know-what-to-give-(or-take)-up-survey-finds)

#### 3. This week's prayer (the Collect)

Almighty God,  
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,  
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:  
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;  
and, as you know our weakness,  
so may we know your power to save;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen