

LENTEN ENVIRONMENTALISM

2/18/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Lent 1 (B): Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

As we prayed about and contemplated the tragedy in Parkland, Florida this past week, Richard and I talked about how we must never allow ourselves to become numb to the fact that the lives of innocent children are being lost for no good reason, again and again. And, yet, we realized that, if we preach about the violence in our world every time something horrible happens, we would be preaching only about violence.

We've decided, instead, to continue the Lenten sermon series we've been preparing. But before I continue, I invite you to a few moments of silent prayer—in thanksgiving for the lives of those who were lost in Parkland, Florida; in gratitude for the first responders; and for comfort to those who mourn their loss.

[SILENCE]...AMEN.

So...welcome to Lent! I'm guessing many of you have already begun your practice of giving up something for Lent—like chocolate or alcohol. Others of you have begun taking on a spiritual discipline, rather than giving-up something. Either way, the intention is to follow the instruction of our Lenten liturgies, which indicate we should participate in self-denial, self-examination, repentance, prayer, and fasting, along with reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

However, giving up sugar, meat, or alcohol—without further thought—is probably not the kind of self-denial Jesus had in mind, when he said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” I just can't imagine that God really cares whether we're eating chocolate or not. But what I believe God definitely does care about is whether our chocolate-eating, in some way, brings harm to others. Were the cocoa beans and sugar grown as precious resources were destroyed? Were farm-workers exploited in the process? What's at the crux of our self-denial is, are we willing to give up some of our creature comforts—what best serves us—for the good of the whole?

Even though I said I'm not going to focus on violence, we are in Lent, and so we must ponder the ways in which we contribute to the violence in our world; as well as the ways in which we keep silent and allow the violence to continue. Violence comes in many forms—violence against other humans; violence against the environment...violence against God.

This morning we prayed the Great Litany at the beginning of the service, acknowledging our manifold sins. And throughout the rest of Lent, we'll use another version of that from the Ash Wednesday liturgy. These litanies can make the season of Lent seem negative...maybe even depressing. But the goal isn't to beat ourselves up, rather it's more like spring-cleaning, when we wipe away the muck and gunk of the past year. Yet, as you know, in order to wash away the dirt, you first have to be able to see where the dirt is.

At the same time, as soon as I mentioned “violence against the environment”, some of you may have wondered: “Why are we talking about environmentalism in church?”. I'll ground these words, then, in the Book of Common Prayer, which is basically our Christian scriptures reformatted in the form of prayer, supplications and praise.

This morning, I want to refer you to a petition on page 268. If you'd like to read along, on page 268, three paragraphs from the bottom, you'll find a petition about the environment: For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, Accept our repentance, Lord.

For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, accept our repentance. What scientists have been telling us for quite some time is that the earth—our fragile island home, as it's described in one of our Eucharistic Prayers—is being destroyed by human activity. Not only are we ruining eco-systems, speeding up the extinction-rate of many species, degrading waterways and losing landmass, our consumption is threatening the livelihoods, food security and ability to survive of other human beings.

The point of self-denial during Lent is to remove the things in our lives that are distracting us from our focus on God, or God's will. Likewise, the intent is that if we give up something for the 40 days of Lent, we would have, then, created a new habit. For instance, a post on Facebook suggested we might give up some deeply ingrained patterns in our lives such as racism, stereotyping, hatred, bigotry, misogyny, patriarchy, white supremacy, or damaging religious rhetoric. And, today our scriptures indicate we might add, giving up a percentage of our energy usage.

This morning's reading from Genesis is referred to by scholars as the "Noahic covenant"—that is the covenant made through Noah to the rest of creation. Noah's story comes shortly after the two creation stories found at the beginning of Genesis. In those two, slightly different stories, we find a message about our role in God's creation.

In the first story, as God creates the heavens and the earth, calls it good, and, eventually, creates humankind in God's image, the male and female are blessed, and then God says to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion...over every living thing."

The second creation story describes God placing Adam and Eve in the garden in order "to till and to keep" the land. The words used there—subdue, have dominion over, till and keep—can have connotations of humans having power over the rest of creation. In reality—whether it's dominion, or till and keep—those concepts are translated from Hebrew words that all have to do with being good caretakers of what God created. The implicit message is that, because we were created in God's image, we, in turn, have the responsibility to care for that which God created.

Through Noah's obedience, as he takes God's instruction, and cares for people and animals alike, we obtain a promise of God's faithfulness. Unlike a contract that spells out how one party or the other might legally remove themselves from the relationship, a covenant is formed out of the intention that the two parties will strive to stay in relationship always.

In a covenant, there is an inherent sense of mutuality—it's not an "If you do this, then I will do that". But rather, "Because I want you to know how much I love you, I am doing this." And simultaneously, the other party is saying, "And because I love you so much, I, too, am doing this."

We are in covenant with God, and in the Noahic covenant, as God promises that when we see the rainbow in the sky, we will be reminded of God's faithfulness, we are also nudged to the acknowledgement that this extends to all of creation. As it written in this morning's passage from Genesis: "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

The passage points out that we belong to an earth-community, and that through our belonging, we must remember those who came before, as well as those who will come after us. So God adds, "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."

The upside is not one of us has to do this all alone, or all at once, for that matter. The environmentalists remind us that starting with simple things will make a huge difference: turning down our thermostats in the winter and up in the summer, turning off lights when we leave a room, and recycling.

And, yet, it's not as easy as it sounds, is it? Almost every time I look down at my gas mileage, I think of the mistake I made at the Toyota dealership last spring. I went with the intention of trading in my Prius for a hybrid Rav4. Before I knew it, however, the sales guy had convinced me the hybrid model wasn't all that efficient; that the regular Rav4 would get decent mileage; that it was more affordable; and, most convincing in his appeal, was his assurance that I really deserved a shiny, new Rav4.

So I caved. As it turns out, I love driving my Rav4...there was never any doubt that I wouldn't. But whether I couldn't afford a hybrid, or whether I couldn't afford the extra gas mileage, was not my concern when I went into the dealership. My concern—my intention—had been to drive away in a vehicle that would be environmentally friendly...as well as comfortable.

Thankfully, the Litany of Penitence, that I mentioned earlier, provides a model for working through these sins—those places in our lives where we lose sight of God's will. So a few of the petitions end with the response: Have mercy on us, Lord.; the response of the next few is "We confess to you, Lord", and finally, a number end with "Accept our repentance, Lord".

The movement is from becoming aware of our own sin; admitting or confessing those sins; and then making a plan to do things differently—that is repenting. All of this to say, that if you haven't already figured-out what it is you are giving-up, or committing to do this Lent, how about giving up some of your carbon footprint? You might think of it as a tithe, and give up just ten percent.

For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, accept our repentance, Lord.

-AMEN

The Collect

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Genesis 9:8-17

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.”

Psalm 25:1-9

- 1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *
let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
- 2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; *
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.
- 3 Show me your ways, O LORD, *
and teach me your paths.
- 4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.
- 5 Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting.
- 6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; *
remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.
- 7 Gracious and upright is the LORD; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
- 8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.
- 9 All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

1 Peter 3:18-22

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 persons, 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 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."