

February 21, 2021

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9: 8-17

Mark 1: 9-15

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Emerging

In the Bible I was given in third grade Sunday School, the tops of the pages, above the columns of the printed text of scripture, have short episode titles that some Bible-marketer invented for the stories, presumably to make them easier for the casual reader to find when leafing through the pages. If I were the one who'd been hired by some well-intentioned publisher in the 1950's to write these headings, I think I'd have given to this story from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark the title, "Jesus Jumps In."

This is the moment in that gospel where Jesus makes his entrance onto the stage of history, and before Mark has scattered more than a handful of words, Jesus is already dripping, post-baptism, on the banks of the River Jordan – no Mary and Joseph for familial context, no shepherds or magi to add a patina of legend, no Herod or Caesar to connect the moment to world history. Just, "in those days, Jesus came." And the breathless narrative barely gives Jesus a moment to savor his own baptism ("You are my Son, the Beloved – with you I am well pleased") before, "immediately," he's Spirit-ed off into a forty-day wilderness retreat in the company of Satan himself, and wild beasts, and, almost as an afterthought, ministering angels, thank goodness. Don't expect Mark to give us a peek into Jesus's retreat journal, though: no sooner do we learn that 40 days have passed and that John the Baptist has been arrested, than Jesus has already begun his ministry in earnest, "proclaiming the Good News of God." Jesus jumps in. The whole narrative seems to hurtle toward the gospel's first imperative, which sits at the crest of our reading this morning, and at the crux of the gospel: "*repent*," he proclaims – "repent and believe the good news – for the time is ripe and God's realm is drawing near."

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. The season gets its name from an Old English word that may connote the lengthening of days as the season progresses toward the spring equinox – and in honor of that submerged layer of meaning I'd like to suggest we slow Mark's breathless pace down long enough to think about Jesus emerging: from what, into what, and how. This seems timely because, as we watch Jesus step out of the wilderness and into his life's work, it's hard to miss the resonance with our own longing to emerge from the wilderness of various exiles imposed on us by inadequate systems of public health and public morality. Almost exactly a year

ago, as Lent began, you may remember a tweet that went (you should pardon the expression) viral: “Honestly hadn’t planned on giving up quite this much for Lent.” Now that it seems at least barely possible to begin to imagine that our own season of giving up might be about to turn a corner – I find myself needing a moment to wonder what we might learn from Jesus’s emerging.

Mark tells us almost nothing about how it is for Jesus to step back into the familiar world around the edges of the Sea of Galilee, with the memory of temptation and wilderness still raw. In this gospel, Jesus seems almost to shrug off whatever weight he may be carrying from his encounter with Satan; having endured loneliness, vulnerability and isolation, he’s now been given back the company of community and the energy of purpose. The detention of John the Baptist by malevolent authorities has created a void – and Jesus emerges into that space with his own confident, timely version of John’s message: repent – or, more literally and simply, *turn!*

This morning’s other reading offers another story of emerging – so familiar, but so very different. In my Bible the episode title writer gives this one the happy heading, The Covenant of the Rainbow. This is, of course, God’s effusively reassuring promise to Noah and his family, when the flood waters are finally subsiding, that the terror and destruction they’ve just witnessed and survived will never again be repeated. But there’s an interesting detail to notice in this story: it’s a monologue. Three times, in the course of unspooling God’s solemn promise, the text repeats the stock Hebrew narrative phrase *vayomer*, “And God said.” Noah never says a word: no acknowledgement, no expression of gratitude or relief, not even a skeptical, “OK…” The great scholar Robert Alter says that, in the conventions of Hebrew dialogue, silence from an auditor is significant – an indicator that something is missing. All eyes are on God’s promise, and on its lovely poetic seal, the rainbow. But divine speech is meant to elicit response – and in this case, where there might be acknowledgement, instead there is silence. A covenant is an agreement; what can it mean that Noah does not respond to the one being so evocatively commemorated over his head? Forty days of rain, cooped up with a floating cross-section of life on earth, and then Noah emerges in silence? What’s going on?

My friend and colleague, the Rev. Margaret Fox, finds a potent clue in what happens next. The final piece of the story of Noah – which never makes it into Sunday School curricula or Sunday worship – might get the episode super-title, “The Drunkenness of Noah.” After unloading the ark, Noah and his family settle down and plant the first vineyard and make the first wine – and then… certain things happen, under the influence of alcohol, that cause Noah’s family to splinter, and that and leave nothing less than a curse echoing down through history. And it’s the last time in the pages of scripture that we ever see the one whom we have to thank for our even being here.

No one quite knows what to make of that last episode – and, as I so often say, it’s worth pausing for a moment just to contemplate the fact that that story made it into the book at all, when it could so easily have been left on the cutting room floor. But my brilliant friend Margaret Fox has an intuition about it that’s so astute it takes my breath away. She thinks that Noah - having watched his entire world swept away before his very eyes, having endured the ordeal of building and filling and piloting and landing and surviving the ark, emerges into the sunlight after the flood as a survivor of trauma of destruction at a magnitude that a Hiroshima victim would understand. The words about the rainbow seem not to register in his glazed eyes; the promise, the reassurance,

has no fresh place to land in his scarred memory. Interestingly, Noah is not remembered in Jewish tradition with quite the same reverence that attaches to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob, Moses and Miriam: he's a survivor, a servant, but not quite a hero. Abraham and Moses each faced moments of God's heartbroken rage at the perversion of humanity, and each had the temerity to argue with God, to talk God down.¹ Noah didn't do that – and Rabbi Jonathan Sachs wonders if he later drank to numb his regret. So the flood came and swept Noah's world away – and when he emerged into the sunlight of God's promise, maybe the best he could manage was a brooding silence and, finally, a retreat into his own personal oblivion. For whatever reasons, Noah wasn't ready to emerge into a new beginning.

And are we?

We've got at least forty more days of wilderness, I guess – probably more. That ought to give us time to think about how we want to emerge. The time – to borrow a phrase from Jesus – is drawing near; the time is ripe; the time is readying.

When Jesus stepped out of the wilderness and into the ripeness of his time, his first word was “turn!” It had been John's word too (Mark 1:4; cf. Matt. 3:2, Luke 3:3), before he got arrested; but Jesus picked it up from the dust where Herod's goons had tossed it aside in the scuffle when they came and dragged John away; and now, immediately, Jesus wielded the word with confidence and with urgency.

How did he do that – what made it possible for him to emerge like that?

Mark doesn't tell us much – but he does make sure to include in the lean story of Jesus's baptism the words that Jesus heard as he stood, dripping, full of purpose and wonder on the riverbank after his baptism: *You are my child, my beloved; I am so pleased with you.* I think Mark wants us to imagine the power of the memory of those words – and maybe to think that they were what he needed to survive Satan, the wild beasts, the wilderness. After all, we know how powerful words like that are; that's why we'll whisper them again to Evelia at her baptism this morning, hoping she'll hold them close until she's old enough to hear Jesus saying to her, as Jesus says to us all, with confidence and urgency, his first word to history, his first word always to us in the ripeness of our time: *turn!* Isn't it our believing in our belovedness – our memory, at some primal depth, of God's blessing – that helps us to be able to turn, when the time is finally ripe?

¹ Cf. Genesis 18, wherein Abraham carefully reasons God away from the total destruction of Sodom, and Exodus 32, wherein Moses speaks to the rage of God after the Israelites construct and worship a golden calf.

Last week brought a quiet anniversary of an emerging that I'm sure still lives in the memory of every one of us who saw it on television. It was 31 years ago, just after 4 p.m. on Feb. 11, 1990 – that Nelson Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison, outside Cape Town. He was 71 years old, and had spent 27 years in the wilderness of incarceration. His supporters had not seen him in public since 1964 – so they didn't expect the tall, unbowed, white-haired gentleman in the elegant suit and tie who strolled out into the sunshine that day. What is it that enables someone to emerge from that kind of wilderness with that kind of dignity, and then to wield that kind of truth with that kind of confidence and urgency, if not the indelible memory, somewhere inside you, of the whisper of God: *you are my child, beloved one; I am so pleased with you.* Not that we should confuse Nelson Mandela with Jesus. Only that we should not forget the difference that it makes to recognize belovedness when you see it, in yourself and in other – or forget the urgency of the call to turn when the ripeness of the moment comes. That day, in Cape Town, Nelson Mandela spoke to history when he said, with confidence and with urgency,

“I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Or, in other words, “Turn!”

Turn! – the first word, the *mot juste*, of Lent. The flood was about what had gone so wrong among human beings. Its aftermath could have been about turning – about making a new try to get things right, having been given back life again. But instead of turning outward, poor Noah imploded – for reasons we can understand, even forgive. God bless him. But turning inward is not our paradigm – and God save us from imploding, with history ripening again around us.

How will we emerge from our wilderness? What will that time be about? Will we just go back to bars and restaurants, back to shopping – back to angry rallies, maybe, on all sides – back to searing violence, back to not trusting some of the people emerging from their own wilderness because they're different, because we disagree with them or feel threatened by them? Noah and Jesus were given back the world. So are we about to be. So, in fact, is the whole planet about to be – think about that! – at a scale that has perhaps never been contemplated since those ancient days when it seemed that a flood had obliterated everything. Has the memory of belovedness lodged in a deep enough place that we'll be able to draw enough strength from it to turn outward – to begin a new, ripe time?

I think maybe the episode title that should go above the piece of the story we're about to write, this Lent, might be, Given Back the World.