



A Lot Can Happen in Forty Days

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
The First Sunday in Lent ~ March 1, 2009*

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.'

A lot can happen in forty days. If you don't believe me, ask Noah.

I trust that you are familiar with the general outline of the story of Noah - with the flood, the ark, and the rainbow - but I want to highlight that story, attending to the character development of the two leading roles in the drama: God and Noah. I am going to suggest that these two are changed by their experience together and their relationship with one another.

When the curtain rises in chapter six of the Book of Genesis, God is angry, grieved, and frustrated. Human beings, just recently created, have been carrying on in ways most violent and displeasing to God. So displeasing, in fact, that God has determined to wipe them all out; indeed, to wipe out every living creature. "The Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created - people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord." (6:7-8)

Thus, Noah enters the stage: "a righteous man, blameless in his generation, Noah walked with God." (6:9) God proceeds with plans for destruction by way of a terrible flood. At the same time, God instructs Noah how to save himself, his family, and one pair of every kind of creature - by way of an ark. Without a word, Noah follows the directions, and God says, "I will establish my covenant with you." (6:18)

You know well what happens next. The rains begin and continue for forty days and nights. The waters swell and every living thing is blotted out. In time, God remembers Noah, the rains cease. The winds blow, the waters subside. Noah sends first a raven, then a dove, to learn if there is dry land. Noah and all of the occupants of the ark venture forth.

Noah built an altar and made a burnt offering. "And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said..., 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.'" (8:21) "God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the

earth.” (9:1) Creation is given a new beginning. And, as we heard in our reading this morning, God placed a bow in the sky: a sign and reminder of the covenant God has made with Noah and every living creature.

While the story book version ends on this upbeat note, the text says more. Noah continues by planting a vineyard, making wine, getting drunk, and falling asleep in his tent, stark naked. Noah’s son, Ham, sees his father and tells his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, who cover their father’s nakedness. It is not clear just what Noah or Ham did or saw, but it was bad. The story ends with Noah cursing his one son, while blessing the two others.

The story line – from the beginning – moves from anger and destruction, to a glimmer of hope (in righteous Noah), through annihilation, to a new beginning with a new - and eternal – promise. Then a twist, with human failing ongoing.

A lot can – and did – happen in forty days for Noah. Life as he knew it came to an end. A new life was given. Old land lost, new land found. We hear that he was righteous and obedient. If we allow our imaginations free rein, we can picture terror, grief, hardship, hope, jubilation. At the end, Noah is given new freedom, promise, and power – to bless and to curse. Which, alas, he abuses. One might conclude that it was a bum deal for Noah; he started out blameless and his status in the last analysis is dubious at best. Yet he was the one found by God; he pleased God, was blessed by God, rewarded by God, given the promise of many offspring.

What of God? What changed for God? How did God change? Before we speak to “how” God changed, we might want to question “if” God changed, or changes – ever.... “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever;’ the New Testament reads at Hebrews 13:8; but that one late and questionable verse aside, there is virtually no warrant in the New Testament for any claim that God is immutable, - [unchanging] - and there is equally little in the Hebrew Bible.” “Contradictory as this must seem, [God] enters time and is changed by experience. Were it not so, [God] could not be surprised; and [God] is endlessly and often most unpleasantly surprised. God is constant; [God] is not immutable.” (p.12)

This is what Jack Miles affirms in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *God: A Biography* (Vintage Books, 1995). Miles writes “about the life of the Lord God as ... the protagonist of a classic of world literature; namely, the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament.” (p.10)

With God, as with any literary character, there is more to them than what we read; we imagine their life off stage as well as on. The God we meet in the beginning of the Book of Genesis is not the same by the time we get to the last pages of the last book. Miles seeks to trace those changes. I’m sure Biblical scholars have taken issue with Miles’ approach, but he contends that, “a self-consciously naïve, start-to-finish approach, besides being more respectful of the integrity of the Bible as a work of literature, has... a surprising drama and pathos about it.” (p.13)

If, for the purposes of our thoughts today anyway, we entertain this perspective, God is a puzzling, troubling character. To date, in Genesis, we have not heard that God is really satisfied or pleased with having created humankind. “I am sorry that I have made them,” said God. God has conflicting motives; for God created, yet is angered by God’s own creature; God wants both to nurture and destroy. Somehow, through our text, through the flood, God finds a new resolve. Destruction of humankind does not in fact result in better people; we still do harm. But God chooses, in this text, to stay with us. Never again shall I destroy my creation – even though we continue in evil ways.

God is acknowledging for the first time that the relationship God is in with humankind is not one that God can simply walk away from. God is now in it for the long haul. Up until this point, that was not a given. For the first time in God’s relationship with us, God shows mercy – revealed in the simple “Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.” It made all the difference. By the end, God no longer expects perfection. God expects goodness and holds us accountable, but promises not to destroy us.

Carol Gilligan observes, “What God learns is that terror and destruction don’t change things and that the very evil in the story of Noah that God wanted to eradicate comes back. So God then makes a covenant to stay in relationship with us, and that creates the possibility of change.” (Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, Flowers, BS, ed., Doubleday, 1996). Through subsequent chapters and books of the Bible we will see this learning blossom and grow, deepening especially as God becomes human in Jesus Christ.

We are at the beginning of Lent. I suggest that we view the shifting landscape of Noah and God’s relationship as the context for our own forty day season of journey – through a flood, a departure, an exodus, a journey, into the wilderness. For this is a time in which we might grow, might face ourselves, face anew our relationship with God.

A lot can happen in forty days. Forty days from now, we and the people with whom we live will have experienced deaths and births, friends lost and found, love lost and found, firings and hirings, entire seasons of self-discovery with crisis and chaos, inspiration, revelation and redemption. In forty days entire governments may be destroyed

or rebuilt, discoveries made that forever change the landscape of our known world. We may find ourselves in wholly new relationships, or in wholly new understandings of familiar ones.

My hope and my invitation to you is that you take an active part in your spiritual journeying these next forty days. Noah did not choose his journey, but he entered upon it willingly, faithfully. Despite our delusions of self-control, we may not choose our journeys, but we can embrace them. Lots will no doubt happen even if we're passive, if we simply show up for life. But mark these days in a special way. Undertake some simple act that is, for you, a spiritual discipline, by which I mean any act that focuses our attention on our own spiritual hungers, or our blessings, or our relationship with God or God's creation.

The most natural of spiritual disciplines is prayer; make time to pray. Or perhaps we choose to make time for silence, a daily walk, writing in a journal. For some, fasting and abstaining from some seductive food or drink is a good discipline – not for the diet or the sobriety (although these may be a bonus) – but through fasting, to attend to those things for which we truly hunger; that's why one fasts.

While I hope you will take this invitation to the observance of a holy Lent with real seriousness and integrity, a word of advice. Spiritual discipline, to be fruitful, requires gentleness – from our staunchest critic who, for many of us, is not God, but ourselves. Be gentle with your self. Lent already began. If you didn't begin a discipline, it's not too late. If you are undertaking a discipline and slip a long the way, don't abandon your practice, pick yourself up and keep at it.

During our journey in Lent we may feel lonely, in deep waters, but we are not alone. God is with us. Ask God to journey with you. What role is God playing in your life? What is God experiencing with you? Frustration, anger, or grief; hope and patience; seeing possibility and new life? Is God seeking to destroy old patterns, create a new life, let you drift 'til the waters subside? Whatever else, we know that our relationship with God is neither static nor set; it is continually unfolding.

Will we be changed through our experience with God in these forty days? Will God be changed by God's experience with us? On this first Sunday in Lent it's too early to tell, but a lot can happen in forty days – and probably will.