Sermon for l Lent, Feb. 18, 2024

Gen. 9:8-17, Ps. 25:1-9, Mark 1:9-15

My fifth grandchild, Grace, was about 5 when this happened. We were in her room, getting dressed for some event, maybe a party? But Grace had gotten into all the wrong clothes, and her mother, impatient to get out the door, had gotten angry and yelled at her. Trying to be a good Granny, I quietly tried to coax her into her party dress. Grace began to cry, to sob, really - what? I said, Gracie, what? Why are you crying so hard about this? She wept out the words “I don’t want to be a.. a bad person!” This pretty little girl with her light brown braids and big blue eyes flowing with tears - all I could do was wrap her in my arms - “sweetie, you’re not a bad person - at all! Not a bad person, we love you!” I rocked her and held her and finally she calmed and dressed, and off we went.

This may seem an entirely trivial, mundane, really, incident - one that goes on all the time in any household where there are five year olds or people of around that age. The power struggle, be it over clothes, or nap time, or eating broccoli. I have only remembered it and now tell of it because of that one desperate lament - “I don’t want to be a bad person.”

This seems to me like a primal lingering fear, woven into our humanity. Are we good, basically good? Or wicked from our birth? What of this world? Would the God who condemned the world of Noah and drowned it but then changed God’s mind and dried up the earth and promised never to do that again and sent the rainbow to remind us - would God do that again - with atmospheric rivers and catastrophic floods and a year’s rainfall in a day? Is our world indeed fallen, the rainbow just that - a rare shimmering, not often or universally perceived?

If I didn’t start the day with a walk at Ft. Reno Park where I meet nature and dogs and seemingly well-meaning humans before I read the paper, many days would begin with glum despair. And in fact I’ve gotten quite selective in reading the paper. Nothing about the former president, nothing about mass shootings, nothing about what the latest polls say about what’s going to happen 8 months from now, nothing about our impotent legislature, nothing about the wars. As the poet Christian Wyman writes; “One grows so tired, in American public life, of the certitudes and platitudes, the megaphone mouths and stadium praise, influencers and effluencers and the whole tsunami of slop that comes pouring into our lives like toxic sludge” - indeed, it can be hard not to sympathize with Noah’s God, way back then, who just got fed up with us.

Are we indeed, as Ps. 51 has it, “wicked from my birth, a sinner from my mother’s womb. We go from ashes to ashes, we are dust, and to dust we return; is wretchedness our true nature, penitence our only posture before God? Perhaps on this first Sunday in Lent some of us are asking; is our sinfulness what Lent is all about? Reminding us of this, over and over, keeping us on our knees. Tapping into the desperate, fearful plea, “I don’t want to be a bad person!”

In response, I turn to the complexity, the mystery, and the glory of scripture. Alongside the highly penitential language of much of this morning’s liturgy, we have two stories, one about Noah, and one about Jesus.

In the Noah story, as I mentioned at the beginning, God changes God’s mind. At the beginning of the story, some verses before our reading began, we hear this: “God saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was evil continually. And God was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth… and God said I will blot out human beings.” But there was the exception - Noah alone found favor and was spared. Now I’m wildly conjecturing about God here, but it seems as if God, by sparing one human family, Noah and his wife and sons, bought Godself some time during the flood to reconsider. We don’t know why Noah found favor; we’re just told he was righteous and blameless. We also don’t know how God would be able to save humanity through Noah’s offspring if all of them were sons - or were the daughters just left out of the story?

But none of this is the point. The point is what we heard in the reading - that God promised, made a covenant, the first in the Bible, actually, with Noah and his descendants, that God would never again visit the earth with such destruction. God changed what he had planned; God showed mercy; God’s condemnation changed to blessing.

A puzzling and richly told story. To me it expresses an emerging belief in a God whose love endures, despite our sins, a God who values creation and its potential for good more than God insists on retribution for sin. Or at least more than God insists that somehow we must fully atone for the evil we do.

In this morning’s Gospel we have Mark’s version Jesus’ baptism. We have Jesus coming to John who was baptizing with water for the forgiveness sins. Again the presenting situation is human wickedness; people are coming to John out of repentance for evil. Again the cry “I don’t want to be a bad person!” Then Jesus shows up and is also baptized by John, but now something new: the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and then the voice, deep and rumbling like that of a father, or perhaps soft, warm and comforting, like that of a mother. We’re not told, and we likely imagine the former. The voice says, you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. No condemnation, only blessing. God’s love meeting our human potential for evil with blessing. Then having done that, God sends Jesus to be tempted, to meet all that the world will throw at him and to test his faith and strength. Jesus must face all of this and of course, later, the Cross, but he goes to the wilderness armed with God’s blessing.

I think what these stories both suggest to us is that the love which created us in the first place is with us from the beginning, and when we fall short and miss the mark, in big or small ways, that love of God will still be there despite whatever punishments or temptations we face as we surely should and will. But our goodness is more than our sinfulness. That’s where things ended up with Noah; that’s how God met Jesus at his baptism - mercy and blessing outweighing condemnation.

I believe that. I believe in a God for whom our imperfect penitence is met with perfect grace. God’s mercy and blessing outweigh condemnation - but don’t we have to let them? Do we let them? Do I get convinced that I’m stuck in my sins? Do I let the morning’s news convince me that our country or our congress or our warring world is stuck? Am I letting honest recognition of my shortcomings be overwhelmed by guilt and hopelessness. Or do I, in faith, let God’s lavish love free me? Perhaps that’s a good question for Lent. Do I let God’s lavish love free me? Rather than focusing on self-improvement or punishment in order to get right with God, how can we work on embracing ourselves and this world as already beloved. Can we accept God’s blessing on Jesus, and on us, as beloved, well-pleasing to God and then live as if that were so? When I fear that I can’t measure up, that I’ll be a bad person, can I, in those moments, feel the loving arms of God around me, assuring me that I’m not, that I’m loved no matter what. And then can I, can we go out into the world and live that way? Amen