

"A Unilateral Action"
Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
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On the bargain shelf at the Montgomery County library this weekend
there was a 75¢ paperback called
God for Us, Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter.
It looked as though it had never been touched, it was so crisp and clean.
Several authors I admire were listed,
So I plunked down my three quarters and brought it home.
It has proved to be full of riches, including the assertion
That if Advent and Christmas are the seasons of "God with us,"
Lent is the season of "God for us,"
--for our liberation, for our healing, for our wholeness.
The untouched look of the book, though,
is something of a clue as
to how many of us feel about Lent.
We don't much want to go there,
we know it's important, but we may prefer
to leave the book unopened?
The cover is crisp from lack of use.

Lent is a season of disillusionment --of clear seeing.
A time to look dead on at the cross
--in our hearts if not in our heads--
and think about the failings in ourselves
and with the human community, which led Jesus to die for us.

On this first Lord's Day of the season of Lent,
Mark's gospel begins at the beginning
with Jesus' baptism.
It is paired with a more foundational water story,
the story of Noah's ark from Genesis,
just as the flood has ended.
It's not a story about animals or arks.
It's a story about the very heart of God,
And how what happens in the heart of God can remake the world.

It makes sense that we are given this story at the time in the church year
when we're asked to pay close attention to our own hearts.
Looking in to your own heart is daunting,
not only is the idea of thinking about our sinfulness hard,

but the secular world gives Lent a complete miss.
Walking around in the world for the next six weeks
won't bring any sense of shared undertaking with people around us.
No one is playing *Lord Who Throughout These Fort Days* at the mall.
There won't be any sparkly purple banners hanging
from the street lights on Main Street.
The stores have gone straight from Valentine candy
to chocolate eggs and flop-eared bunnies.
To me it is a big plus to have
at least one important season of the Church Year
unblemished by commercial hype,
but, of course, that means whether or not we ever get anywhere
near the heart of Lent
really is up to us as a body of Christ.
So it is a good thing, today to begin lent with a story
about the heart of God.
We know the beginning of the story.
God created the world to be good, God created us to be good,
harmonious, and obedient,
but it didn't turn out that way.

Humankind turned out to be rebellious and cruel.
One day God looked into human hearts
and saw nothing but violence and evil
and God felt betrayed and heartbroken.
"And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth,
and it grieved him to his heart." We are told in Genesis six.
So God decided to blot out humankind in a great flood.

What comes next is the part of the story we know best,
Noah and the ark.
Notice I didn't say "Noah and the flood."
That's because we don't think of it that way.
The only flood most people want to deal with
is well-contained in their own bathtub.
We have turned the Noah's ark story into a pleasant game
or collectibles to be displayed.
What household with children, religious or not,
doesn't have it's share of Noah's ark bathtub toys?
Pairs of animals made of plastic
who can be walked up a waiting gang plank
into an ark with a door or a roof that opens and shuts?
In our house, the Little Tykes Noah's Ark bathtub toy was a favorite,
with Noah, Mrs. Noah, a hefty son or two,
and fat pairs of animals who all floated nicely

when they plopped off the side of the ark into the water.
They had the added bonus of being too big to swallow.
My kids are adults now and the ark sits in a box in the basement.
Most of the animals have become loners.
The elephant and sheep are mate-less, but a pair of chickens still exist.
Together in the box they are enough to resurrect the jolly image
of Noah and the ark, and happy sheltered children.

It occurs to me that the reason why we are happy to turn the story of a devastating flood
into Noah's ark complete with children's toys
is because we don't want to consider the alternative.
The alternative is that the Creator
really can decide to give up on creation—and once did.
The Creator is free to change the divine mind,
to push everything over the cosmic cliff, and start fresh.
God looked at creation and God's heart broke
looking at how humankind turned out.
Once upon a time, God decided to abandon us.
Is there anyone here this morning
who hasn't felt abandoned by God at some time or other? I certainly have.
We don't pay much attention to the first part of the Noah story
because we know all too well and that human infidelity
to God really does mess up the world, and diminishes us
and the lives of those around us.
I need only say the word Parkland for us to think
of many levels on which our infidelity to God does harm.
The Co-Moderator of the PC(USA) wrote an essay this weekend
asking if the U. S. has become a nation where child sacrifice is acceptable?
And so we let the ark float happily in a biblical bathtub
and just forget the part about God's broken heart.

But today it is the first Sunday in Lent
the season for truth-telling, and the truth is
that God's heart is the part of the story that we need most.
Once upon a time the world wrought hurt and grief in the heart of God
and so God decided to destroy creation.
When the flood waters were gone, humankind was not any different.
God know full well that the people who made up the new creation
weren't going to be any better than the last lot.
When the water was gone, humankind was still sinful
and creation had not changed.
The only thing the flood changed was the heart of God.

God learned that having new things his own way,
the way we humans do, was not the way to wholeness or light.

So God decided against God's own longing for a loveable creation
and pledged to stay with us, to endure, and sustain the world,
notwithstanding the sorry state of humankind.
Broken hearted, God makes a covenant
with humankind, a promise to refrain from ever using coercion or destroying it again.

Even more amazing is that the covenant God makes
has nothing whatsoever to do with Noah.
Noah is not required to do anything at all.
God claims complete initiative for the relationship.
It is an act of amazing graciousness.
The covenant is not only with the human community
represented by Noah and his family.
It is also with all of the creatures of the earth
saved from the flood in the ark.
God is making a "new creation",
one God pledges will be safe from God's retribution
because God has decided to hang up his bow.

This is not the first sermon in which I've mentioned that
the bow is not a romantic or political symbol.
It is not a symbol for the diverse peoples of the earth.
The bow indicated by the rainbow in this story
represents a weapon of destruction and hostility,
a bow and arrows, an automatic rifle that God has hung up forever.
God has declared unilateral disarmament,
and has no intention of ever using aggression or force against humankind again.
The bow hangs in the sky to remind God
of the covenant God has made.
It is not there for you and me.
The bow is there for God, to help God remember
that no matter how faithless we become, God will still stand with us and for us
and will save us.
God has disarmed Godself and will never harm creation again.
The floods that devastated Houston and Puerto Rico were not wrought by God.
The floods that leave so many adrift in a sea of poverty, or drugs and or prison
are not wrought by God.
The flood of pain that flowed into Parkland High School this week
was not of God's allowing,
but in spite of all God's intentions for life.

The heart of God has undergone unilateral disarmament

and God has only one weapon left with which to fight for every living thing. Love.
Love that knows no boundaries;
love that overflows every embankment
the human heart or mind can build;
love that fights and defeats the deadliness in the world
by dying for its sake.

The rainbow was a sign of the covenant for God.

The cross is the sign God gave us.

The cross declares that God will fight using every form of goodness,
kindness, steadfastness, faithfulness, courage, self-sacrifice, and love there is
for our wholeness and our healing,
and will even pull life from death.

Under the sign of the cross we baptized tiny Sophie.

We poured water and prayed and declared that Sophie
is part of God's eternally non-violent covenant of love, too.

We promised to teach her what we know about God
through the life of Jesus, and to do that by demonstrating
our own baptism constantly in all of our dealings.

We made promises, and we meant them,
but it's still a unilateral covenant.

Because, God knows full well, we'll likely will fall short.

But God will not fall short.

To enter into Lent is to discover
in the deepest heart of our heart
that God is out to make the broken world whole, and
will keep the covenant to cherish Sophie
and cherish us, as part of God's choice
to wield love to heal the world forever. AMEN.