

Lent 1 (2021)

The Memory of God

February 21, 2001

Scriptures: Psalm 25:1-10; Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22

Last Sunday I greatly appreciated Audrey's reflections on baptism during the children's time. I suspect we all have our baptism stories: being present at a child's baptism, our own baptism, the baptism of a friend. One of the most meaningful baptism services I have attended was in an Episcopalian church in Southern California. I have previously related this experience, but good stories bear repeating. Patty and I had a Sabbatical leave from our previous congregation and part of our time away was visiting urban Mennonite congregations to learn about their strengths and challenges. We had friends studying at Fuller Theological Seminary, so we made Pasadena one of our stops.

It was the Baptism of Jesus Sunday. That weekend there had been a lion incident in the foot hills of the L.A. suburb. It is a problem for the animals that the humans keep expanding into the hill country, and it is a problem for the humans who view their habitat as their playground. Two off road bikers ventured into the backcountry that day. A chain slipped off the sprocket, and one of the bikers stopped to fix the problem. She was low to the ground toiling with her bike. The mountain lion took this to be prey cowering, and the cougar pounced. Fortunately, the biker was wearing her helmet because the large cat sank its teeth into the head gear, and then then began dragging the biker into the shrub. Her biking friend who had come back to find her friend, grabbed her legs and began a tug of war with the large cat. Both bikers survived as did the mountain lion. The priest that morning likened the leg hold of that friend to the Spirit of God which clings to us, holding us tight in difficult times, unwilling to let us go. I believe in a God who does this for us and for our loved ones. Sometimes I must let people go, but God's Spirit goes with them. God's Spirit goes with us all. God's Spirit holds us tenaciously.

The two old testament passages for this morning draw attention to God's memory. The covenant God makes following the flood is established with "every living creature" (humans and large cats); the rainbow is to remind us that God remembers this covenant. Psalm 25 petitions God to be mindful of mercy and not remember the sins of my youth—again, a focus on God's memory. The humans of both Genesis 9 and Psalm 25 are far from perfect, but God remembers them anyway. We are far from perfect, and God remembers us still.¹ We are remembered. God will not let us go in tumult or toil or transgression. God keeps a firm hold on us.

¹Marian Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Lent / Easter* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 19-26.

It is at this point I wish to comment on the death of Allan Klassen. Allan was a pillar of this congregation. It is hard to even speak of Renata Klassen without including the name Allan Klassen. One of Allan's favorite scripture texts was the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 which, along with the two other parables of lost things in Luke 15, affirms that God is receptive to and seeks out the lost ones of our family and friendship circles. God remembers us. Allan believed in this God and acted accordingly. I and we will miss Allan.

The N.T. texts both reference baptism, and in some respects this ritual of the church helps us remember that God remembers. It serves a similar function to the rainbow. Further to this, baptism links us with the path of Jesus who also remembers us; he is the one who goes to prepare a place for us, who will not leave us orphaned or abandoned. We are not alone; it is good for us to hear this Good News. Water appears in baptisms and water is a part of the Genesis story as well.²

The sacraments, of which baptism is one, is treated differently among our Christian denominations. At our Sunday afternoon NPMC social ZOOM time last week someone remarked that I wouldn't necessarily make a good Anglican. This comment came as I lamented the very dry wafer some of us had consumed that day for communion as well as the overly sweet juice. Those little cups and wafers do suit the COVID-19 world, but do no justice to the body and blood of Jesus. Maybe the church goes should just bring their own wine and decent bread, I suggested, and those on the ZOOM laughed. My grievance with the wafer, however, does not mean that I am unsympathetic to a more liturgical tradition understanding baptism and God's relationship with us.

God chooses us. God goes walking and biking with us. This is not our doing. God chooses us. The question is not if we are God's beloved children, but how shall we respond given the fact that we are God's beloved children. We are not perfect people, but the biblical voices read in context remind us that perfection is not a precursor for God's love or relationship with God. Sometimes, I wonder, if affirming God's choice of us at a younger age doesn't make good theological sense. In this vein I quote now from Peter Marty, the current editor of the *Christian Century*.

A quick survey of Catholic and Protestant baptismal liturgies reveals an ordering that seems peculiar to me, even if those liturgies have all kinds of historical precedent. Parents and godparents are typically asked to make promises about raising their child in the faith—before their kid ever gets splashed with water. Other advance questions surface before the splash: Do

² Ibid.

you renounce the devil? Will you strive to live a life in opposition to sin? Do you have the courage to challenge the powers of this world that ignore God?

Such questions are certainly pertinent to a life of faith. But by placing them before the baptism actually takes place, the church gives the impression, certainly to those outside the faith, that the grace in baptism is conditional. You meet approval and pass muster if you utter the proper words. Answer correctly and you're eligible. Respond unsatisfactorily and you're out.

Imagine if all these questions instead came after the baptismal action of water, as if the presiding minister were to say, "Now that you've been baptized, now that you have been received by God without condition, now that you have had grace poured on you without any prerequisite behaviors, there are some joyous responsibilities that go with this new life you're now undertaking. Do you think you can handle them? Are you open to striving to fulfill these promises we're about to ask you to make?"

Of course you are! And you know what? We as a faith community are ready and willing to help you out. We're going to start right now by pledging to pray for you and your child. Sound like a plan? Great!"

Something similar could be argued for the re-ordering of confession and forgiveness. I'm not aware of any tradition in which the absolution of sins comes regularly before the confession of them. But this would make gospel sense. We don't confess our sins in order to be forgiven; we confess them because we are forgiven. Think of all the places where Jesus announces forgiveness for guilty people prior to them cleaning up their act or promising to repent. You can start with the paralyzed man on the stretcher or the story of the prodigal son and go from there. Forgiveness is either unconditional or it's not forgiveness at all. It's not a contingent enterprise. We ought to put the joy of absolution first in the liturgy and then rely on it as inspiration for leveling honestly with God and with one another about our sin.

I know it's dangerous to tamper with liturgies that have been centuries in the making. But maybe it's time we get beyond suggesting that grace has a this-for-that logic to it.³

So, then, we emerge from the ark of Genesis 9 and we emerge from the baptismal waters divinely affirmed and still human. What shall we do? What shall we do this Lenten season and beyond:

- We are loved, chosen, by God-- can we acknowledge this?? We are loved, period. And there is space this Lenten Season for us to rest with this reality and gently allow it to shape our actions.

³ Peter W. Marty, editorial in *The Christian Century* (January 13, 2021), p. 3.

- The Creation, and those around us, are chosen by God as well. The covenant, remember, is will all creation and the animals around us. Given our chosen-ness we have choices how we care for other beloved creatures and the creation of God. Take your cloth bags to shop. Respond to your partner graciously. Support public health care. We are all chosen by God as is all those and that around us. This leads me to my next thought....
- A word about needs to be said regarding the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in our communities. Nicholas Christakis, in his 2020 book on the pandemic entitled *Apollo's Arrow*, reminds us that epidemics are not equal opportunity killers—that they more significantly impact those burdened by “chronic illness, advanced age, or substantial poverty.”⁴ We have a biblical responsibility to speak and advocate for those living in chronic illness or substantial poverty: be they in Saskatoon, on reserves, in third world countries. It is not fitting the biblical texts of this day that the rich and powerful get inoculated while those in poverty go without vaccines. Let us keep this in mind as we listen and speak.
- Finally, the ark carries us. Baptism carries us. We are not instructed that we will be exempted from the floods of life or the struggles of life or the betrayals of life or the crucifixions of life. We are told that we are invited into the ark amidst chaos (regardless our state of being), that we will be held through the waters.

I conclude my sermon this day returning to that baptismal service at All Saints Church in Pasadena. The priest not only sprinkled water on the children being presented for baptism that morning, he sprinkled it on us. He took a palm branch. He dipped in in the baptismal font. He cast the drops from the palm branch as far as he could fling them. One or two hit me. I remember those drops.

There is chaos out there—in our lives, in the biblical texts, in our futures. There is an ark for us. There are rituals and hymns to remind us of God’s care for us. We are a people, God’s people, who are part of the ark. Rest in God. Rest in God’s community. Draw strength from our rituals of the church and the people of good will God places in our lives. God has gone before us. Trust God’s steadfast love and mercy. – Amen.

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⁴ Nicholas A. Christakis, *Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live* (New York: Little, Brown Spark Hachette Book Group, 2020), pp 178-179.

#306 VT “I want Jesus to Walk with Me” (Public Domain)
#327 HWB “Great is thy faithfulness” (One License #95006)
#82 STJ “Water has held us” (Sing the Journey License)
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February 21, 2021

Lent 1

Service of Shadows

Prayer of Confession

Words of Assurance

This lent our service of shadows will serve as a prayer of confession and words of assurance.

Reader 1: Too often, Oh, God, we find ourselves in troubled waters. Economic, relational, health, and social concerns threaten to overwhelm us. We extinguish a candle aware of the burdens we carry.

(Silence-15 seconds)

Reader 2: God says to us: “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. Never again shall you or the earth be cut off by the waters of a flood.”

Reader 1: Thanks be to God.