

Rev Dr Rebecca L. Kiser
Wrong Relationships....with Creation
Feb 21, 2021 Lent 1B

It's cool that last week's lesson in our Testimony class was on covenants, and used Genesis 9 to discuss this covenant God initiates with Noah, his descendents, and interestingly, with all living creatures - a covenant to never again destroy the earth by flood. Did you ever see the phrase about the covenant being made with all living creatures, and not just Noah's family and their descendents? I'd never noticed that - skimmed over it, I guess, as uninteresting or superfluous - until this time.

Now I'm not going to discuss the historicity of this flood, or try to discern the mountaintop where the ark supposedly landed, or the extent of this disastrous flood. Weird weather events are common in our earth's history, even without the impact of humans on things, as we're seeing now. Abraham & Sarah are dated about 2000BCE, and the flood story came earlier; and because the Gilgamesh civilization is mentioned in other places about the flood, maybe it happened before 3000 BCE. There are studies that show unique weather events around that time - there's speculation of a massive asteroid or comet, and seemingly evidence of a fluctuation in the sun's radiation levels. Other civilizations have flood stories as well - including on other continents - China, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Greeks, the Aztecs.... The study of these even has a name - geomythology. So while we might doubt the veracity of these pre-writing stories, it's evident that something significant happened to creation around this time.

An interesting part of this being in our faith history is the faith meaning given to this event. The ark has become a symbol of God's preservation - preservation of life and people and faith. The church is often perceived as a kind of ark, preserving faith and the world, with boats and arks appearing in many of the symbols of the Capital-C Church. The concept of a "remnant" of people preserved to carry on the faith also carries across.

It's interesting to me that this One true God made a covenant not only with Noah's family & their descendents, but also with the wildlife - all living things. The Hebrew stories from the flood time indicate that God gave up on most of humanity, and wanted a "do-over." God didn't give up on the wildlife and other living things - just the humans - but all of nature was devastated because of the humans. It's on us that the burden of fault and destruction is laid. And in our

century we're the ones to blame for the crisis coming up for the world again. Maybe we oughta look at that.....

So why am I going here on this day, the first Sunday of Lent? Other years I've preached about Jesus' temptations, the suffering of Christ on the cross 'for us and for our salvation,' and the generic call of the Lenten season for us to examine our lives to see where we could serve Christ better. This year I was convicted by the way I'd never seen the phrase about this first covenant, this unconditional covenant, requiring nothing back from us, being made also with all living things. It occurred to me that we humans are not in a right relationship with creation - "right relationship" is what "righteous" means. And Lent is a good time to examine places where we are not in right relationship - and repent, as Jesus calls for in the Mark text.

We humans tend to look at history and the world as human-centric - we're so much less aware of the rest of creation - the creatures, the wildlife, the habitat, the environment. We've tended to think that God is only interested in us, that we're the part of creation that really matters...although that's not scriptural. Indigenous peoples seem to have stayed more in tune with the fact, yes the fact, that as human creatures, we are not separate from the rest, but rather intricately connected to it; connected through sharing the same atoms and materials, connected through our interdependence with all that happens in our earth biosphere, like the health of bees, the status of clean water and clean air, the rising of the climate by just 1 degree changing the oceans and water levels and ocean currents, and swamping coastlands, and so on.

We humans are part of ALL God's creation; the creation story in Genesis 1 puts our creation on day 6, with all the other mammals, although it sets us apart by saying we are made in the image and likeness of God in ways that other animals are not. Mostly people have interpreted that to mean that creation is just here for us to use - or use up; instead of seeing that, if we are to be like God, we are instead given more oversight, more responsibility, more awareness and consciousness. And we are still embedded in creation: what happens to our habitat happens to us - - and visa versa, that what we do affects our habitat. The fault of the destruction in Gen 9 is laid at the door of human irresponsibility and sinfulness. And may well be again.....in our current era, humans are having a horrid effect on all living things through our arrogant perspective that this is all here for us to use and abuse, that we are more important than the rest of creation, and that God cares more about us than anything else in creation. It hurts our testimony that folks outside the church are the ones calling for ecological awareness and concern - some in the

church, yes - but largely Christ's church has tacitly overlooked the faith perspective in our own Scriptures and egocentrically preferred to make the story all about ourselves. We could have spoken a corrective word ages ago, and perhaps prevented things from getting to this state.

As I read the texts for today I also noticed for the first time, that Mark describes Jesus as going into the desert with the wild beasts. That story of Jesus in the desert is well known by us - we could easily tell the details: 1. that it follows on his baptism, 2. that he's there for 40 days (which is why Lent is for 40 days), 3. how he was tempted, 4. how he fasted, and 5. how he passed the tests. That he was there with the wild beasts seems a superfluous detail - unless we realize that folks who wrote Scriptures were more in touch with the rest of creation...and it DOESN'T say that beasts attacked him or he was fearful of them, or that he killed & ate them - just that he was out there in the desert just like them.

I don't know why this affected me, except that I've done a couple fasts in the woods, and the creatures out there came into my awareness in a new way; I watched them doing their creaturely things, observed them, & thought about their existence. I still get excited when a deer goes by my office window like it did yesterday, stepping high over the snow drifts, nibbling on tender tree limbs. And it made me wonder about God's care of them - they're not furry, and they have skinny legs for such cold weather. When my cat meows at the back door and I look out and see tracks of a racoon, I know why Mr B likes to sit at the door and look out. It amazes me that these creatures of the woods are coexisting with humans as we invade and take over their spaces. They're still here but I rarely think of them. Back in my sister's neighborhood in Myrtle Beach, we sometimes saw alligators, and others saw black bears. How little their existence registers on us as we go about what we humans consider important things like building new houses and tearing out trees for parking lots.

We humans have been pulled into a wrong relationship with creation, because we forget that it's not all about us. Scriptures talk more about our environment and other living creatures of this planet than we hear in most sermons - in fact, in years of most sermons! The apostle Paul teaches in the letter to the Roman believers that what people need to know about God is evident through creation; he also says that creation groans like a woman in labor under the fall of the world due to human sin - and longs for God's recreation of all things. And the groans of a woman in labor are some groans, if you haven't heard them or made them. It's not just humans that have new life in the Christian vision of the future - the whole WORLD is made new. We

overlook that, and think of some heaven that has nothing to do with earth. Yet the Scriptures are clear that the vision of the new creation is about a new heaven AND a new earth.

You know, there's so much we humans get wrong, that it overwhelms me - and I wonder that God even bothers with us anymore. I am amazed & awed & humbled that God still seeks us, and continues to offer restoration and new life to us. God still calls us to walk in the fullness of love and knowledge, and relationship with God's self. We humans are so self-involved in our quests for individual wealth & dominance, our own egocentric versions of success. We see it playing our once again in this Texas calamity over cold and snow - it was too expensive to be a part of any larger grid that involved the government; it ruined their profit to winterize any of the equipment - with little thought of what might happen their clients - and anyone who couldn't afford to fly out. I have read some heart-warming articles about folks helping one another in TX, though, stores who lost power for their cash registers and just let folks go out with their groceries because they knew the people needed it; people with trucks spending all day pulling cars out of ditches, going to rescue old folks stuck in a freezing house. Sometimes we do get past our self-centeredness.

We humans need a good Lenten examination of our wrong relationships - how a wrong relationship to creation - our planet, our environment, - has led us the brink of massive climate changes that are the results of our own despising of the earth given to us. We're usually too concerned with our own individual welfare and profit - scared creatures that we are, with no trust in God and no awareness of the deeply Biblical teaching that the good of ourselves is tied tightly in with the good of all. After all, Jesus came for the salvation of the WORLD, not just so that I could smugly say that I was bound for some other-worldly heaven.

I always like to find some good news, some gospel, in the sermon texts. I find it at the end of the Mark lesson - that Jesus came back from the desert, "proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" Thanks be to God that God does love us, and continues to reach out and call to us to repent, and see that the realm of God has come near. May we have a meaningful and life-changing Lent. AMEN.

Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Gen 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹I 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.”

¹²God 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: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶When 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.” ¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Psalm 25

¹To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

⁸Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

1 Peter 3:13-22

¹³Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;

¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.