

JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS LENT 3--NOAH AND THE GREAT FLOOD

(03/24/19)

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 7:1 - 8:12
Matthew 4:1-11

“The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.” (Genesis 7:12)

In keeping with this morning’s reflection on the Lenten theme of the wilderness experience, specifically as it applies to Noah, I want to say that those of you who are not attending our Sunday morning Bible study are really missing out on something! As you know, this year we are reading the book of Genesis. Recently, much to our surprise, we discovered that Noah’s wife was not actually Joan of Ark! I, for one, did not know that. This apparently is a common and totally understandable misconception.

I hope this gives you an indication of the depth of theological analysis we bring to our discussions every Sunday! It is amazing what you discover when you *actually read* the Bible instead of simply guessing what it says—and guessing that it always agrees with your personal point of view!

Today is the third Sunday in the liturgical season of Lent. In our Lenten reflections this year we are focusing on the theme of the wilderness experience and its connection to the number forty. The number forty is a symbolic or archetypal number, a number that has psychological and spiritual significance. When used as a measure of time, it denotes a meaningful or special time. For example, when scripture says that “at the right time” God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, the Greek word that is used for time is not *chronos*, meaning regular time, but *kairos*, meaning at the right time, indicating that the event happened according to God’s plan.

In our worship throughout this Lenten season we are looking at passages in the Bible where we find the number forty to see what light they might shed on our own experiences in the wilderness. If the wilderness experiences that were recorded in scripture are indeed tied to the matter of spiritual growth, to spiritual and psychological transformation, then perhaps our wilderness experiences are or can be as well.

Last week we talked about the prophet Elijah, his struggles with queen Jezebel, and how he withdrew into the wilderness to escape the consequences of her wrath. While he was in the

wilderness, depressed, he had two powerful religious experiences. In the first, the angel of God gave him the sustenance that he needed to embark upon his forty-day journey to Mt. Horeb.

Two weeks ago, we talked about Jesus' experience in the wilderness following his baptism. The Gospel of Mark tells us that the Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness where he stayed for forty days and forty nights. I believe Jesus used this time to pray or meditate, to strengthen the power of the Holy Spirit within him. When he emerged from the wilderness following his forty-day ordeal, he emerged as a transformed person.

The description of Jesus' wilderness experience that is presented in the Gospel of Matthew, which was written several decades later than Mark's account, goes into considerably greater detail than Mark does. Both Matthew and Mark, however, agree on how Jesus ended up in the wilderness. Mark says the Holy Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness. Matthew soft-pedals this a little when he tells us "Jesus was *led up* by the Spirit into the wilderness."

Why would the Holy Spirit drive or lead Jesus into the wilderness? Why would the Holy Spirit drive or lead *us* into the wilderness? Matthew and Mark state that while Jesus was in the wilderness, he was tempted by the devil, also known as Satan or the tempter. But why would God's Holy Spirit, to whom we pray for guidance, lead or drive or deliver us into Satan's hands, lead or drive us into a situation where we will be tempted to become someone other than the person who God wants us to be?

One possibility is that God is testing us. Perhaps God sets up or arranges difficult situations in our lives to test our faith. We know that some people handle the difficulties of life better than others. From this point of view, this life is not real, not important in itself; it is simply part of a test. If we pass (whatever that means), we go up when we die. If we fail, i.e., if we have doubts, if we lose faith, if we break under the strain of life, we go the other way.

Although I understand the theological belief that God arranges bad things to happen to us as a test of our faith, i.e., that "there are no accidents," I cannot reconcile this explanation with my understanding of the God whom I find revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us that God is like a good and loving parent, a much better parent than our own human parents could possibly be. This is why I find it difficult to believe that God would do something to us that no loving parent would do to his/her child.

If your child were born with a brain tumor, would you really find it comforting to believe that God had caused this affliction to test either your child's faith or yours? If your teenager were to die in an automobile accident, would you find it comforting to believe that God had arranged the accident to test you, to see if you would still remain faithful when your child was taken from you? If you were to come down with Parkinson's Disease, would you take comfort in the belief that God was making this life difficult for you, but that if you handle the situation well you will be rewarded when you get to heaven?

Some people apparently find this theology comforting. They find it comforting to believe that God is not only in charge of but actually ordains every single thing that happens not only in their lives but in the entire universe, even when this implies that God visits great tragedies on us. An example of this is the 25% of people in the United States who believe that God chose Donald Trump to be our president. I do not find this comforting. I have difficulty believing that a God whom Jesus portrays as a loving parent would be so cruel to his children.

I don't think this theological stance does justice to the role of temptations and our wilderness experiences in our own psychological and spiritual growth, in our individuation. It seems to me that God does allow us to be tempted, from the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden on up, but not in a causal, mechanistic way. It is interesting that Jesus tells us that, when we pray, we should ask God not to lead us into temptation. This implies that God, in some way, has a hand in our temptations, or that God and Satan are in league with each other, as they obviously were in the Book of Job. The Book of Job tells us that Satan is one of the "sons of God," sort of like a brother to Christ or God's left hand. Seen from this perspective, our temptations, our wilderness experiences, by breaking apart the old structure can lead to psychological and spiritual growth.

I don't believe the difficult and painful things that happen to us in life are a test arranged by God. They may indeed test us, they may even test our faith, but they are not intended or designed as a test. I think the things that happen to us in life just happen. I think some illnesses happen because we don't take good care of ourselves or because we have poisoned our environment. I think we are susceptible to certain illnesses because of our genetic predisposition. Most of the time I think it's just the luck of the draw.

I don't think God arranges automobile accidents or terrorist attacks on large metropolitan areas to test our faith or teach us a lesson. I think automobile accidents happen because we are careless or distracted drivers, and terrorist attacks happen because our free will enables us to choose evil over good and because there are more sociopaths in the world than we would like to believe. What I do cling to is the experience of the constant presence of God in my life, in your life, and in the world, always working to strengthen us, to heal us, and to guide us. I do believe that God's hand is often or always in our temptations, our wilderness experiences, working to break apart the old structure, the old wineskins, the structure that is not life-giving, functioning in the service of our individuation, our psychological and spiritual growth.

In the Book of Genesis, the number forty appears several times in the story of Noah and the Great Flood. God causes it to rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights. During this time there is tremendous destruction. Almost all of what God had previously created is swept away. The writer of the Book of Genesis says,

And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. God blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

Then scripture says that God "remembers" Noah and the animals that are with him on the ark. This is an interesting comment. If God "remembers," then God apparently can forget. In any event, God finally causes the wind to blow and the flood gradually subsides. The tops of the mountains finally begin to appear. Then, "at the end of forty days," Noah opens the window of the ark and sends out the three birds to see whether there is any place for him to land.

The biblical account of the flood may describe an actual flood that was so extreme that the people believed it was caused by God. If so, it would point to a time in the evolution of God or in the evolution of our understanding of God when we felt we had little protection from God's wrath, from God's destructive power. Destroying all living creatures in a flood is a very primitive or unconscious way for God to deal with the *complexio oppositorum*, the complex of opposites in human life: good and evil, light and dark. God decides to destroy the dark or the evil side so only the good will remain.

Of course, God's ingenious plan doesn't work. Shortly after the great flood, which kills so many innocent animals and human beings, humans go right back to where they were before. According to scripture, God eventually realizes that this wasn't a great solution to the problem of the evil that attends the gift of free will, and he promises to never again destroy the world to "make it better." The rainbow is a sign of this covenant; it is meant both to assure us and also to remind God of his promise.

Let's think of the flood symbolically. What would it mean for us to experience a flood? The people in the Midwest and Northcentral states know what this means. Have you ever had the feeling that the ground beneath you had been swept away by something that was happening to you, something over which you had little control? Have you ever had the feeling that you were "going under," that "you couldn't keep your head above water?"

Think of all the hymns we sing that depict us as blown about by the stormy sea. These can't all be about actual storms at sea or when rivers overflow their banks. They are about our life experiences and our reactions, our responses to these life experiences. What is especially unsettling is that most of the time we didn't do anything to deserve the inner and outer storms that threaten to destroy us. Think of the innocent people and the animals that died in the scriptural flood; they suffered because of someone else's sin. This happens more often than not in life. Painful things often happen to good people. Tragic things often happen to good people. As I mentioned several weeks ago, life just isn't fair.

Let's think about the ark symbolically. How are Noah and his family able to ride out the flood that destroys so many others? They are able to survive because *Noah listens to God*. Noah is proactive; he begins to build his ark long before it begins to rain. When the rains come, Noah is like the man in Jesus' parable who builds his house on the rock. Those who build on the rock are able to survive the storm. Those who do not build an ark, like those who build their houses on the sand, are swept away by the storms of life.

We need to build an ark, not literally but symbolically. This ark must be built not of wood but of faith. It is not by accident that the design of the sanctuary of our church is in the shape of an upside-down boat. The keel is at the top supported by the beams that hold the sides of the boat together. The main portion of the sanctuary of a church is called the nave, which is taken from the word "naval" or "navy."

The church is like the ark. If we build it, not only literally in our support of our church and in our care of this building, but also symbolically in our own spiritual disciplines, if we build and care for our own *inner church* as well as the outer church, we will have what we need to not only ride out the storms of life but also to be psychologically and spiritually transformed by them. In the words of our closing hymn this morning, we need to let Jesus pilot our boat.

Let us think about the wilderness experiences of our lives. There are times when life drives us into a situation that we did not choose, much as the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. We are apparently not meant to live like a boat that is safely anchored in harbor. The Holy Spirit constantly calls us forth into life, constantly challenges us to grow. This is the only way we can evolve, the only way we can become the unique individuals that God wants us to be. The Holy Spirit doesn't break apart the comfortable structures of our lives to test our faith. *The Holy Spirit breaks apart the comfortable structures of our lives to help us grow!*

When we are in the wilderness, we will be tempted just like Jesus was tempted, just like the ancient Israelites were tempted during their forty years in the wilderness. We will be tempted to turn back, to settle for less than we should in life. We will be tempted to choose safety and security over growth. Jesus was able not only to survive his wilderness experience but also to be transformed by it because he kept thinking about what it was that God wanted him to do, who it was that God wanted him to become. Instead of trying to manipulate God to fulfill his own desires, he molded his will to God's. This is why he emerged from his forty-day ordeal a transformed person!

Noah had his own wilderness experience, his forty-day ordeal. Noah is able to ride out the storm because he has built an ark. Noah is able to ride out the storm, but there is no evidence that Noah grows spiritually through the experience. He emerges much the same person that he was when the wilderness experience began. Like any good sailor, he becomes drunk shortly after he reaches shore. This is true of many people. In order to emerge from our wilderness experience, whatever it is, as transformed people, we need to respond to it as Jesus did. We need to pray, to meditate, to strengthen the Holy Spirit in us. We need to find the ways in which the ordeal may be leading us forth into new life. If we can do this, we may feel the hand or feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in our wilderness experience.

In this Lenten season, let us think about Jesus' experience in the wilderness, Elijah's experience in the wilderness, and also Noah's. Let us think about our own lives and our own spiritual journey. Perhaps we, like Jesus, Elijah, and Noah are passing through a difficult time in our lives. How can we use this time to strengthen the power of the Holy Spirit within us? If we do nothing, we will either be broken by our trial or, like Noah, we will emerge roughly the same person that we were when our ordeal began. If we do this, we have lost the opportunity to enter into an experience of psychological and spiritual transformation.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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March 24, 2019