

sermon-3/1/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“God’s Disarmament”  
Genesis 9:8-17  
By Jim Patten

Wm. Loyd Allen, a professor of Church History and Spiritual Formation at McAfee School of Theology, says “God’s purpose for a unified, harmonious cosmos remains in conflict with humanity’s corrupting influence.” He goes on to say, “Lent recognizes this imbalance, giving us a means to seek restoration by embracing our sin and mortality. Will we repent, accept our finitude, and stop grasping for control, or will we continue the violence?”

That, to me, is the question we all face as we enter Lent. If we can’t face, and even embrace our own sinfulness and mortality, our finitude as Allen puts it, we will not be able to curb our desperate need for control, our need to be in power which inevitably leads to violence.

We face our mortality on Ash Wednesday, rubbing our foreheads with ash. It can feel like a slap in the face to remember we are dust and to dust we shall return. In a culture that runs from aging, let alone death, embracing our mortality is a counter-culture act of rebellion. It takes courage to face our limits, and ultimately our own death.

The lectionary presents us with Lenten texts that help us do the work Allen lays out for us. Most of the Old Testament texts in Lent are about covenants, the covenants we have with God. The first covenant we encounter this Lent is the one God had with Noah, and through him, all creation.

The Noah story is really a pretty primitive story. It presents us with a God who is very punitive and destructive. Drowning all of humanity, men, women and children, in a fit of righteous anger raises some troubling questions about this God. Fortunately we don’t have to take this story literally. Instead we can recognize the theological point captured in this story. That point is the focus of our text for today. The Noah story culminates in an exquisite covenant.

We begin to see that this flood story is a story of re-creation. As you remember, the first creation story starts with the earth covered with the waters of chaos. God separates the waters at creation making a space for people to live. When the first humans are created they are told to be fruitful and multiply. They are also told to be vegetarians. Go back and read the end of chapter one in Genesis to see that clearly stated.

Sadly the gift of free will leads to corruption and violence. The violence culminates in the waters of chaos covering everything up again. Eventually the waters recede and people, once again, have a space to live. It is the creation story all over again.

Noah and his family emerge from the ark and are told to be fruitful and multiply. This time, however, God is more realistic. God says they can eat meat. They don't have to be vegetarians. It is a concession and the carnivores among us sigh a huge sigh of relief! God then makes a covenant with Noah and his family. This covenant is totally gracious. It comes at God's initiative. Noah does not have to make any promises. All the responsibility for this covenant lies with God. And the covenant is not just with human beings. It is with every living creature on the earth and even with the earth itself. This is a green covenant at its finest. All creation is given dignity and is treated with respect. God cares as much for birds and animals as God cares for us. This is really quite stunning. Not only are there no chosen people given special status. There are no chosen species.

In this primitive view of God, we are told God decides to disarm. God places his archery bow in the clouds facing away from human beings. We, of course, call God's bow a rainbow. But in that day, they believed God shot lightening arrows at the earth using a bow.

Genesis says God gives up God's bow and places it in the sky as a reminder. Note, however, that this reminder is not for us. We are told whenever God sees the bow set aside, God will remember that the time for anger and punishment is over. Grace will trump judgment.

Scholars say this story of God's disarmament is powerful. For God to surrender Divine power is almost unheard of in that time. This is a story of gracious surrender all for the benefit of a people that are far from perfect, people like you and me.

New Testament writers, particularly First Peter, picked up on this flood story. They saw it as a story of redemptive destruction. By that they wanted to affirm that sometimes destruction can become redemptive. Sometimes something has to die in order for something new to be born. Sometimes old patterns, old beliefs, some old ways of doing business have to die for some new way of doing or believing to have a chance to take root. I think we can all relate to that.

And because the flood story involves water, notions of baptism can't help but come to mind. We say when we are baptized our old selves die and we rise to new life. This is especially clear in the immersion form of baptism. When we go under the water we die with Christ. When we emerge from the water we rise again to new life. In this process we accept the new covenant God has made with us in Christ.

Interestingly, in this new covenant, God disarms again. Only in the new covenant God, in Christ, goes to the cross. Jesus willingly surrenders himself to the powers that be in his day. It is in his speaking the truth to power and accepting, in apparent weakness, the consequences of his actions that God's saving love becomes clear.

All of Lent builds to that moment of surrender on the cross and then the ultimate triumph of God's love at Easter. We can enter Lent, this somber time of recognizing our

mortality and sin, because we know the end of the story. God's gracious covenant brings us wholeness. We sense that grace in the Noah covenant. We Christians see it most clearly in the new covenant in Christ.

When we take communion to start Lent, we are reminded of that new covenant right at the beginning of this journey to the cross. May our sharing this meal help us find the humility and the courage to embrace our finitude so that God's re-creating power can renew our minds and hearts. Maybe then God can continue the work of restoring creation through us. Amen