

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 9:8-17
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1:9-15
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FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

“Baptism”

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On the surface it seems like our Old and New Testament readings today have absolutely nothing to do with each other. We could look at overall themes and say that just as Jesus was preparing to begin his ministry, Noah and his family were starting a new life, but that’s really tenuous. What *really* connects these two passages, oddly enough, is baptism. And they are connected by a passage that is not even here, 1 Peter 3:18-22. It is one of the more strangely speculative passages of scripture. According to I Peter after Jesus’ death, and presumably during the three days before he physically rose again, Jesus went and preached to “the imprisoned spirits— to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.” I Peter says, “In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.”

While such a comparison may seem odd to us, what we need to understand is that only in relatively modern times has the use of allegory to interpret scripture been frowned upon. For centuries both Christians and Jews made use of allegory as an interpretative tool. It is only our post-Enlightenment perspective that narrowly defines texts in their original contexts and negates all others. And I confess I have that bias! But the author of I Peter saw a deep spiritual connection between the flood and baptism.

So once again let’s look at our Old Testament passage today to understand the New. Remember there was no New Testament in the 1st century. It was still being written. The Old Testament was the scripture of the early church.

The story of Noah’s ark is an extremely ancient one. It predates its written form by thousands of years. And it is not the only story that speaks of a massive catastrophic flood with a small remnant being saved on a boat full of animals. When friends tell you it’s all a made-up fairy tale you can say, “Not so fast!” The Epic of Gilgamesh’s version of Noah is named Utnapishtim. He isn’t the only Noah, however, there’s also the Akkadian Atrahasis. And the Sumerian king list includes antediluvian kings, that is, pre-flood kings. Reliefs of antediluvian sages known as *apkallu* figures, or winged genies also lined the walls of Assyrian palaces. This is rather fascinating because according to the Hebrew legends before the flood angels had intermarried with humans and caused a huge problem. *Something more we can ask God about when we get to*

heaven. And in all of these stories the hero is warned by a god and given detailed instructions on building an ark. Utnapishtim and Atrahasis' ark was round. In all, animals are gathered two by two, and birds released once the ark had run aground to see if there was enough dry land. Of course there are also differences, but the fact that there are at least three very similar accounts demonstrates a shared memory. Physical archaeological evidence also backs this up, revealing that there was a massive flood in the region about 7500 years ago. Remnants of a pre-flood society have been found a number of feet under the bottom of the Black Sea.

We can come up with a scientific explanation for the flood in the form of melting glaciers and water bursting through the land bridge and pouring into a fertile basin of land. The now salty Black Sea was once a much smaller freshwater lake with land surrounding it. Scientists believe that when the ocean water burst through it would have been two hundred times the force of Niagara Falls and destroyed everything in its path. It would also have filled an area higher than the former World Trade Center in New York. But ancient peoples had no knowledge of melting glaciers and changing planetary temperatures. For them any catastrophic event could only be understood in terms of divine anger. And it must be said that there is something distinctly unusual about building a very large ark on dry ground before any sign of trouble appears. It takes time to build an ark. There is no human way anyone in the region could have known what was about to happen. This wasn't a slow flood. This was a drastic earth-shattering event. A warning from God makes a lot of sense. But however the warning came, most people ignored it. And we still do! God is speaking through scientists today who have been practically jumping up and down trying to get our attention about the danger of climate change and rising sea levels, and we as a species have sat by in complacent denial.

The story we have reflects an ancient historical event and gives us an interpretation of that event. It is obvious that the human authors of this story created a god with human limitations. God gets angry and remorseful. God judges but really doesn't want to, decides to save some, accepts a less than perfect humanity in the end of the day and promises never to do it again. It's easy to read our emotions into God's actions. But the one thing that is clear in this story is that God warned people of imminent disaster, and only one family listened. God provided guidance as to what to do, and only one man took up tools and began to build. God took mercy on the animal kingdom and only one family went to collect animals. And when the flood waters came obliterating the center of civilization, they all survived.

In our Old Testament scripture reading today the flood is over, and God makes a covenant with the entire human race and animal kingdom that never again would a flood like this destroy the earth. This is the first covenant, the covenant of Noah. It is **universal** and it is **unconditional**. God made later covenants that required a human response, covenants with Abraham, Israel, David and the new covenant in Christ, but this one does not require anything in return. The covenant of Noah includes the human race and extends beyond it to all of nature. It is an environmental covenant, the promise of God not to

destroy. Perhaps now is the time for the human race to make the same covenant with God, the earth and one another, and to stop our wanton destruction of the planet.

Returning to I Peter's comparison of the flood with baptism, however, theologically speaking, how did the flood cleanse? We are told that the days before Noah were particularly bad, although seeing the depths that the human race is capable of sinking to, it would have to be extreme. But in the flood everything was wiped out. People were given the option to escape on the ark but they refused to believe. The evil was carried away in the waters. It was total and complete. Nothing that existed before existed afterward. The rainbow was given as a symbol of God's promise to us. God took something that existed in nature and said, "Look! When you see this remember my promise." The rainbow is a symbol of universal acceptance and hope.

When we are baptized our baptism whether as a child or as an adult symbolizes a complete washing away of sin. But baptism is not a "get out of jail free" card. Sin still lived on after the flood because Noah and his family were not perfect. The human problem did not change. And we still deal with our own sin even after we are baptized. What changes is not us, but the way God works with us. The flood did not cleanse the human heart of sin, but it did provide a clean slate. Although some believe that the Holy Spirit works in a unique way through baptism to regenerate us, in my observation being baptized does not magically change a person. We have been given a fresh start by grace. Before God we are clean. And every time we come to God and confess our sin seeking forgiveness and help to do better, we are reaffirming our baptismal vows.

Jesus was baptized, not for his own sin but for ours, and he endured temptation in the wilderness immediately following his baptism, for us. Our baptism is God's gift to us of a fresh start. The old has gone and the new has come. Baptism is a concrete expression of God's grace to us and the promise of acceptance and God's mercy. Amen.

Genesis 9:8-17

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: **9** "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you **10** and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. **11** I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

12 And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: **13** I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. **14** Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, **15** I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. **16** Whenever the

rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”
17 So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

Mark 1:9-15

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **11** And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, **13** and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

1 Peter 3:18-22

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. **19** After being made alive,^[a] he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— **20** to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, **21** and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **22** who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.