



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, FEBRUARY 18, 2024

GENESIS 9:8-17; PSALM 25:1-9; 1 PETER 3:18-22; MARK 1:9-15

THE LAST DO-OVER

Mark 1:9-15 *[In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, 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."]*

Have you ever been seduced by the idea of a fresh start? A clean page, the turning of a new leaf? Have you ever gotten caught up in thinking about a decision or choice you've made, and wished/longed for a do-over? Have you ever been tempted by the alluring myth that we can, as an act of will, discard our former selves – choose to wipe out what was, and start again: reinvent ourselves in the hope that things will turn out differently ... this time.

Today's Genesis story is a bit like that. The writer of Genesis tells us that God is deeply disappointed with the way created human life

has turned out, disappointed by people's evil ways, their corruption, and their violence. God is full of regret, and taking decisive action, God opts for a clean slate, chooses to wipe out humanity, along with all living things, and start over.

This is the great flood, from which only faithful Noah and his family and two of each of all the animals are saved. The flood is the ultimate do-over, an extreme act of will made possible by an extreme act of power.

Now, we might be inclined to focus on the righteousness of Noah in this story, as it's

Noah's righteousness that spares him and his family from a watery end. But looking only here, we miss much of the teaching that's hidden between the lines: the significance of the incalculable loss of life - the suffering that was necessary for this clean-slate reality to come about. There was an enormous cost to the world getting a fresh start, a massive price was paid by all the lives lost. The world essentially getting to start again just was not possible without hideous and painful cost and consequence.¹

Jewish scholars suggest this dramatic story marks a critical shift in God's self-understanding, and they suggest **this** is its focus, rather than it serving as a cautionary tale that speaks directly to humanity's need for change.² After all, after the flood, humans don't really change. But, once the waters dry up, God makes the first Covenant, with Noah, and Noah's descendants, and with all of Creation, that there will never again be a catastrophic flood, that is: a catastrophic wiping out of all that is, in order to start again. Never again will there be a catastrophic

flex of power that justifies immeasurable suffering as necessary to bring change.

This Genesis story is a story that has us pay attention to power and to choice, specifically in response to things gone wrong. It is significant that after the flood, God chooses and commits through Covenantal promise, never again to use the brutal power of total destruction to force change.

Anyone with the capacity to make a decision, has some power. Inevitably, in a human-made and utterly imperfect society, some will make far more decisions than others, power is most definitely not held equally amongst us; but we do each get to make some decisions. And with each decision, however seemingly small or trivial, we get to choose how we live into the Covenant into which we entered when we were Baptized into the Christian faith. This Covenant, too, our Baptismal Covenant binds power and choice, and guides how we respond to things gone wrong.

¹ I owe a debt of gratitude to Sarah Lippek, Saint Mark's parishioner, for a conversation in 2023 which encouraged me to consider the Flood in a new way.

² For an exploration of this idea see: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-flood-changes-god-not-humanity>

In our Scriptural texts, the Hebrew word for Covenant is often associated with the word for loving kindness, or faithfulness. This association is really important, because it points to the life-giving promise of Covenant, it is relational; it sets Covenant as an assurance of ongoing life, and relationship. It depends on love. This is how power is bound in our foundational stories.

After the flood, the limitless power of God is acknowledged and held, bound by Covenant, for the purpose of ongoing life. And so change, still so needed, must now be chosen, taken on as a process; change as transformation. Change is ushered in through healing and restoration, not obliteration or annihilation.

Yet, ours is a culture of quick-fixes, 30 day plans, new-year new-yous. This dominant culture still tells us a story of our unbounded personal power, power that can and should be channeled into decisive acts of will. Want to see change? – just do it! Decisive change is what matters, whatever the collateral damage.

It surely is tempting to flex our own power, and force change, force the conditions for something new, for something better to come

into being - whether it be in the realm of our own lives, our own bodies, or in the realm of family, workplace, or wider community. It is tempting to deploy an act of will and use what really is the violence of force, because force, of any kind, is always a violence.

The great Biblical myths, our ancient and foundational stories endure because they still have so much to teach us, we still have so much to learn.

Just as the first Genesis story of Creation narrates a process of becoming, each step of creation, each day, arising only because of the day that came before it, so the creation, and the re-creation of our own selves, our own becoming, the recreation of our own world, each aspect of our transformation is entirely dependent on our responses to the actions, the decisions, the delights and the failings, the sorrows and the learnings that bring us to this moment.

How do we respond to the imperfections of our own lives, or to the things we'd love to change about those we share our lives with, how do we respond to all the things we wish were different in the world around us? With the demanding violence of a forced will? Or with faithfulness and loving-kindness, and an

unwavering trust in the presence and accompaniment of God in it all?

We entered into this season of Lent this past Wednesday, on Ash Wednesday, and we prayed that God “Create in us new and contrite hearts.” This newness that we pray for is not an erasure of all that came before, it’s not a ‘clean slate’ newness, a snap change. This is a newness of becoming, as we examine our habits of mind and action, and commit to

bring ourselves, in confidence and through faith, into healing and restoration, into our assured and life-giving relationship, our Covenant, with God and one another as living members of Christ’s body. Our power bound by our own Covenantal promises: our choice to commit to a faithful life of love and care, in which we relentlessly, and non-violently, strive for change, strive for justice and for peace for all. Amen



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