

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Message for Lent I

The Rev. Michael Burke
Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; Mark 1:9-15



Good morning, and welcome to the First Sunday of the Season of Lent.

Let me ask you a question: Can you remember the last invitation that you received? I don't mean the Facebook invitation that went out to the masses, but an actual invitation? Perhaps it came in the mail.

Long, long ago, people used to send invitations to gather together friends, and extended family, with them, in their homes or places of celebration.

Long, long ago, in a time before COVID, people actually *used to gather together*, if you can believe it, in the same physical space, without masks. (Gasp!)

Its hard to believe that it has been just about one full year that we have been "hunkered down" in pandemic mode. There was Ash Wednesday, 2020. And then, *whoosh!* a strange thing came upon our world: we gave up meeting together, in person, for an entire year. We gave up the holding of Holy Communion in our hands. We even gave up donuts after worship.

Sometimes, it feels like a *lifetime* ago.

But here we are again, with a full year's cycle having rolled around. Here we are, knocking at the front door of Lent, yet again, feeling as though perhaps we never really left here. Feeling sometimes like all of 2020 was one long interminable season of Lent.

So, I admit; I had some mixed feelings this past week about invitations to do things over again.

And yet, on Ash Wednesday, I heard, yet again, the ancient words from the Book of Common Prayer:

*I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,
to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance;
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.
And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature,
let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.¹*

As Lent begins, we are once again *invited in*:

Invited to a deeper sense of community,
Invited into this season in all its fullness,

Invited to our own spiritual journey,
To a time of transformation and personal growth.

And, despite the intervening year, I find myself at this beginning of a new Lent in the same need of renewal, in the same need of “turning again” to God.

The Holy Scripture readings today begin with the passage from Genesis.

To give some context, Noah and his family have just left the ark, having been cooped up inside for what is described as a year and ten days.² This past year of “hunkering down” has given me a new perspective of poor Noah’s tribulation. They are all exhausted, worn out, irritable, longing for things to get back to “normal”, longing to feel the grass between their toes and the unmoving earth beneath their feet.

The first thing Noah does when he disembarks from the ark is to build an altar to offer thanksgiving to God. The second thing he does is till the ground and plant a vineyard. (In that, Noah is my kind of guy.) In between these two acts of faith, **God meets them where they are**. God meets them at the edge of the waters. God sets a rainbow in the sky as a promise. The Book of Genesis, what we think of as the first book of the Bible, describes it as a promise and a covenant:

¹ From the Ash Wednesday liturgy of The Book of Common Prayer, page 265.

² Genesis 7:11: “In the six-hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.”; Genesis 8:13-16: “In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. ¹⁴In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. ¹⁵Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶‘Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you.’” Thus the “40 days” they were in the ark is perhaps figurative and symbolic. Either that or “years” were considerable shorter in their way of estimating, or that all such language is symbolic or metaphorical.

“This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and everything living around you and everyone living after you. I’m putting my rainbow in the clouds, a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth.³

And God blessed them all, and instructed them that they were made in God’s own image, for “in God’s own image, God made humankind.”⁴ And God said “live bountifully.”⁵ (For those of you who are Star Trek fans, yes, in Genesis 9:7, it was indeed *God* who first said, “live long and prosper.”)

And over in Mark’s Gospel, what we hear today is from the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, what we think of as the earliest, or first of the Gospels. This time it is Jesus himself who rises up out of the waters, the baptismal waters of the river Jordan, whereby a voice is heard: “You are my Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

That is, at the water’s edge, **God meets Jesus.**

In both the Genesis passage and this passage in Mark, God chooses. God chooses the human family as God’s own. God identifies Jesus as God’s own.⁶ **In Baptism, God chooses us.**

The common thread in each of these is God’s action in **inviting our intimacy with God. *Inviting intimacy.*** This is the pattern, established in what we think of as the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. And established again, in the very first book of the very first Gospel.

But that pattern, that ***invitation to intimacy***, does not just happen once, or... I suppose, twice, in those instances. Rather, **our God is an inviting God.**

Again and again, God invites us.
Again and again, God calls to us.
Again and again, God reaches out.

Indeed, even the very name of Jesus, in Hebrew “Yeshua,” means **“God saves.”**

Again and again, God meets us where we are. Often broken, bruised, weary, over-stimulated and under duress, God meets us. God meets us with a gentle invitation to return. To “turn again,” to God,

³ Genesis 9:12-13. Notice here that God’s first covenant is made between God and “the earth” that is, all of creation, and not just God’s people. Rather, it is between God and “everything living around you and everyone living after you “ But alas, that is another sermon for another day...

⁴ Genesis 9:6: ““Because God made humans in his image reflecting God’s very nature” is “The Message” paraphrase by Eugene Peterson.

⁵ Genesis 9:7, in “The Message” paraphrase by Eugene Peterson.

⁶ Theology nerds: The words are carefully chosen here, to preclude the possibility of “adoptionism,” an early Christian perspective that was deemed in error by the early church councils.

In fact, to “turn again” is the very definition of repentance, a word that gets thrown around a lot during Lent.

Sara Miles, a Christian writer, tell us that “...*repentance isn't an emotional or a psychological state of mind, and it's not about feeling sorry—certainly not about just saying you're sorry. It means, as my rector Paul Fromberg says, “putting on your big-girl panties,” and turning toward God, actually changing. Not pouring ashes on your head in a fit of self-loathing, but allowing Jesus to gently spit into a handkerchief and scrub off your face, so that you can face your own desire, and God's desire, for conversion, new life.*”

But true conversion, true repentance, isn't only a “turning again,” to God. it is also a “turning again” to see anew the face of God in those around us. It is a knowing that we are *all* made in the image and likeness of God. **Repentance is both a “turning again” to God and a “turning again” to one another.**

Again, Sara Miles writes: “*Repentance means turning toward other human beings, our own flesh and blood, whenever they're oppressed, hungry, or imprisoned; it means acting with compassion instead of indifference.*”⁷

Rev. Denise Anderson, the former co-moderator of The Presbyterian Church, writes: “***Again and again, God meets us where we are***, but doesn't leave us there. We shift from sinking sand to solid ground, navel-gazing to community, personal pietism to justice for all, and [we turn] *away from* behaviors, both personal and systemic, that frustrate God's vision for the world.”⁸

Again and again, God meets us at the edge. At the margins where the ark meets the dry land. God meets us again and again, where the waters of baptism meet the solid riverbanks of everyday living.

Again and again, God meets us in our daily grind,
 God meets us in our weariness and anhedonia,
 God meets us when the kids are screaming
 and the baby needs to be changed.
 God meets us when the house is empty
 and we are far too long alone.

Again and again and again, God meets us.

Again and again comes the invitation to repentance and renewal.



⁷ Sara Miles, [City of God: Faith in the Streets](#)

⁸ Rev. Denise Anderson, in “Commentary on Mark 1:9-15”, captured in *A Sanctified Art* materials for lent 2021, page 5. Italics and emphasis mine. www.SanctifiedArt.org

Like the promise of Spring amidst the winter cold,
Like a rainbow after every flood.
Like a Voice from above, "You are my beloved."

Again, and again, and again.

Amen.

A benediction (and refrain) for Lent:

May your mouth speak of God's goodness.
May your arms hold those in need.
May your feet walk toward justice.
May your heart trust its worth.
May your soul dance in God's grace.
And may this be your rhythm—
Again and again and again,
Until God's promised day.
In the name of
the Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself,
Go with courage, go with heart, go in peace.

The kind of religion Jesus promoted wasn't performative, as so much of religious life can be. . . . There's something poignant about this in a time when we cannot rely on most of the social norms we've used our whole lives. Even facial cues fail us because of the masks we must wear! Performative interactions with God and others will similarly fail us in these times. They simply won't be enough. We must go deeper. Again and again, God invites us into fuller ways of being.

— REV. T. DENISE ANDERSON
FROM *AGAIN & AGAIN*
@SANCTIFIEDART



The Collect

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Hebrew Scriptures

Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and 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. I 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.” God 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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I 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. When 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.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

The Psalm

Psalm 25:1-9

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *

let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.

2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; *
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.

3 Show me your ways, O Lord, *
and teach me your paths.

4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.

5 Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting.

6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; *
remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.

7 Gracious and upright is the Lord; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.

8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.

9 All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

The Gospel

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.”

Playlist and poetry

*Strange how people who suffer together have stronger connections
than people who are most content
I don't have any regrets, they can talk about me plenty when I'm gone
You always said people don't do what they believe in,
they just do what's most convenient, then they repent
And I always said, "Hang on to me, baby, and let's hope that the roof stays on"*

- Bob Dylan and Sam Shepherd, "Brownsville Girl".