

March 1 2009 - Lent 1
Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15
"A New Start, Big Time"
Rev Jeffrey Cheifetz

Genesis 9:8-17: Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 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. 11 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." 12 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: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 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. 16 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." 17 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."

Mark 1:9-15: In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. 14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

AND FROM SWEDENBORG: The reason 'the Jordan' means introduction into cognitions of good and truth is that it was a boundary to the land of Canaan. For all the boundaries of that land meant things that are first and last in the Lord's kingdom, and also those that are first and last in the Church, and so those that are first and last in the celestial and spiritual things which constitute the Lord's kingdom and His Church.. Therefore, being a boundary, 'the Jordan' meant introduction into cognitions of good and truth, for these come first; but when at length a person becomes in himself a Church or the Lord's kingdom they come to be last.

The cure of Naaman's leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14), represented baptism, for baptism means introduction into the Church and into the things that belong to the Church, and so into regeneration and the things that belong to regeneration. Not that anyone is regenerated by baptism; rather it is the sign of it, which he should call to mind. And because the things which constitute the Church are meant by baptism, and baptism is meant by 'the Jordan'. It was the Jordan therefore in which people were baptized by John, Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5. And the Lord too was willing to be baptized in it by John.. Arcana Coelestia #4255.2, 5

We have been dropped into the middle of the conversation between God and Noah, and it sounds very interesting. God is saying, "And as for me, I am going to do this and that." And God means, "Well, I created everything, and it went sour. Then I cleansed everything by means of a flood so we could start over. I am starting over with you, Noah, and your family, and the animals you saved on the Ark. Here's the sign that we are in Creation 2.0 - I have placed my war-bow in the heavens pointing away from the earth, to signify that there is peace between us, rather than trouble and disagreement in our relationship. You will see the bow as the beautiful rainbow, and when you see it you will remember this state of peace, just as I will remember it."

But I guess the pressure of all that good will gets to Noah, because the first thing he does is try to make life easier and more enjoyable - he plants a vineyard, harvests the grapes, makes them into wine, gets roaring drunk, takes off all his clothes and falls asleep in his tent; and when his kids find him and try to make it all better, a whole new problem begins started. So much for God's good intentions.

Well, not quite, because the God of the Bible seems willing to start over in relationships with people any number of times: there is the Creation, everything in which God calls 'good'; then the covenant with Noah; then the covenants with Abraham, his son Isaac, and his son Jacob (and none of them were great prizes either); and so on, with King Saul, and King David, and King Solomon; with the nation itself through the prophets; and with Jesus as he is baptized in the Jordan by his cousin John, who nicknamed the Baptist because he does a lot of baptisms of people who want to start over in a new relationship with God.

Which is the reason why Christians are baptized, even as infants: baptism is the sign of God's covenant love for us, and the outward symbol of an inward reality. That is, something happens inside of us to turn us toward the God who keeps promises, and toward our true Self, and baptism within the community of faith celebrates that turning which promises the coming of a new reality. We baptize infants because something changes within the hearts and minds of their parents, and the parents want to publicly declare in a ritual setting that they will do all in their power to raise their children in the knowledge and experience of God's covenantal love.

In any case, Jesus' baptism is the Gospel writer's way of telling us that the barriers between heaven and earth come down, and that Jesus is claimed and named by God as the One through whom Creation 3.0 begins. If the Flood cleanses the earth in a destructive way so that a new start can be made, the waters of the Jordan are the medium through which people are symbolically cleansed for a new beginning in their relationships with one another and with God.

Jesus' baptism goes a little deeper than that, though: Ched Myers writes that ".while everyone else is being baptized in (Greek en too) the Jordan, Jesus is baptized into (Greek eis ton) the river (Mark 1:9). [[Retired Presbyterian professor]] Herman Waetjen contends that this signifies Jesus' more thoroughgoing defection from the dominant culture, his dive deeper into the depths of the older, wiser tradition, his complete immersion in the alternative vision of God's kingdom." (Baptism's True Claim. by Ched Myers. Sojourners Magazine, July 2006)

So Jesus' baptism is really a new Genesis, and a new humanity is meant to come of it, with Jesus as its first member. Such a new beginning must be tested and tempered, and therefore the Spirit of God drives Jesus into the wilderness, where the good feelings are replaced by the struggle to remember the reality of that wonderful day, and the voice, and the meaning of the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased".

At its very inception, Creation 3.0 is severely tested by the forces of inner and outer chaos, the temptation of distraction and the fear of losing what has been granted, growing hunger, and the fear of physical death by way of the wild beasts. Yes, the forces of sanity and goodness, the angels, are there. But what is heightened in times of unsettledness and anguish but fear and anxiety and the desire for simple assurances and easy answers? I have heard it said that we should not call an area a true 'wilderness' unless there is the real possibility that we could be killed and eaten by the animals of that place. Jesus is in a true wilderness, in both a physical and spiritual sense.

We are meant to understand that Noah lives through that kind of chaos as well, in his case, a watery chaos; and I suppose he does as well as any of us might do in his place, even given all the assurances and blessings and signs and sense of purpose that he is given. You and I are more like Noah than like Jesus, I think, though we may not want to accept that.

You and I don't keep covenant very well, either with God or humans or nature. For some reason we give way before the pressure of all the blessings given to us, and become our own worst enemy, and we act out in destructive ways. We, the children of God, carry the plague of defiance and selfishness and fear very deeply within us, and despite our best intentions, we keep spreading the plague into the world.

That is why we are given Creation 3.0, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who shows us the way toward the kingdom, the reign, of God. He teaches us, he models it for us, he is the living Presence of God with us.

Having been tested and tempered, he comes through that intense internal and external experience of deadly fear as a whole human being who places the full weight of his trust, come life or death, in the reality of the living God. He is ready to share the good news about what he has found in the midst of that struggle - the reign of God in every fiber of his being - which has become real within his spirit, within his psyche.

Do you and I have that depth of trust? Do you and I have the reign of God within the very core of our being? Have you and I lived into the "complete immersion in the alternative vision of God's kingdom?"

Well, I'll speak only for myself:
I often give way to fear,
fear of what could happen,
fear of falling short or failing,
fear of disappointing people.

I often stop short of saying and doing what needs to be said and done,
so that relationships might be healed;
so that the demands of compassion, let alone justice, might be met; so that what is broken might be mended.

I often resist change that would be good, and helpful, and constructive, because, after all, I have my comfort levels; and
Change brings the distinct possibility of discomfort; and
Change means work, and effort, and thought, and prayer. Maybe, if I just ignore the still small voice, it just might go away and leave me alone.

What truths do these same questions evoke in your own hearts, and in the heart of this particular community of faith?
Before what forces do you give way? When do you fail to follow through? And what do you resist?

Aren't we all far more like Noah than like Jesus? Aren't you and I a mix of what we were and what we could become, a mixture of old patterns - some of which still work well, and some of which do not - and emerging insights that point toward the possibility of new freedom?

The reason we read the sacred texts is that we see ourselves mirrored in them, in the stories and personalities and poems and narratives. And we want to know more; more knowledge, to be sure, but also more wisdom. What we are truly

seeking for is a way forward for us in our own lives, a way that makes sense and that hints of our own healing, our own becoming more fully human.

I suggest to you that we are hoping for Creation 4.0, and that is why we engage in a spiritual quest, both as individuals and as a community of faith. We want to see the new creation unfold because it is exciting in its sense of promise. We want to become more skilled in relationships. We want to become more fully our true selves in this lifetime and beyond, more fully what God created us to become.

I also suggest to you that this community of faith is consciously engaged in a similar process. Who are we? How did we get here? What needs to be healed? What needs to be changed? What new patterns of being and doing is God calling us to take on? To what extent are we plastic and pliable, and where are we hardened into place?

This is hard work, but it is more than that. It takes thought, prayer, courage, and the willingness to experiment, to try new things - in other words, to play in the fields of the Lord.

Play? Exactly. If the Lord is with us, who can be against us? If this is the Lord's church more than it is our own, and if the Lord encourages the creativity, wisdom, and trust of his people, then we can be less anxious, and more excited, about what could happen here. If we believe in the God who makes covenants and keeps them, and who is willing to start over with us again and again, then why not hold it all a little lighter rather than tighter? Our God is on the move. The ability to adapt to change is a large part of being fully human.

The sacrament of communion, or the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist, like baptism, is a reminder, like the rainbow, that we are not abandoned to our personal and corporate wildernesses. It is the reminder that the Lord is with us, to nurture, comfort, accept, and yes, nudge us toward the reign of God. It is the entry point for us into the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples for the last time, before he completed his journey on this earth. And here, we, like them, receive that which we cannot earn, that which we cannot manage to deserve, and that which we deeply need:
the reminder that we are loved,
the spiritual food and drink that nurtures us along the way,
and the promise of community, that we are not alone in the spiritual quest.

Here, at the beginning of the season of Lent, the journey of 40 days and 6 Sundays that leads us to the Feast of the Resurrection, we show up with hope in our hearts; a sense of connection with one another and with nature itself; and trust in the One whose voice comes to Jesus at his baptism, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This is the good news of God for all of us: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

May Creation 4.0 become more and more real within us, between us, and through us!