

The First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018
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Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

Last Sunday, we dedicated a set of six needlepoint panels – the product of several years of dedicated work. They're hanging in the hallway now, across from the Chapel.



Each panel depicts one of the six days of creation as described in the first chapter of Genesis. They're really quite lovely. Not quite so lovely as Creation itself, I should allow, but lovely still!

The loveliness of, and God's holy love for, all Creation is the backdrop for the whole of our religious tradition and particularly for us here this morning. Let's start at the very beginning:

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep ...*

And then God spoke. And there was light. And there was life. And the sun and the moon and the stars came to be. And great sea monsters swam in the oceans. And critters crawled upon the earth. And birds flew in the sky. And it was good. And it was good. And it was oh-so-good.

And then God made humankind. God created us – male and female – in the image and likeness of God. And God gave everything that had been created into our care. God made us to care for the world and for one another. God made us to live in perfect harmony with one another and with this glorious creation. And then? Well, then it was VERY good!

But it all went bad so very quickly. Jealousy led to enmity, and strife led to murder ... all in a single generation. And the downward spiral continued until the whole creation was spoiled. And it broke God's heart to see it:

[God] saw the great wickedness of the people of the earth, that the thoughts in their hearts fashioned nothing but evil. God was sorry that humankind had been created on earth; it pained [God's] heart. Genesis 6:5-6 (The Inclusive Bible)

The world still, too often, is heart-breaking for God to behold. Too heart-breaking for any of us.

I think of the 17 killed in another mass shooting in a high school in Florida this past week. This time it happened on a Wednesday: Ash Wednesday for a good many of us; and Valentine's Day for most others. We gathered to be reminded of our mortality ... but not like this! Loved ones anticipated sweets and flowers ... but were devastated instead. One photo, of the so many shared these past days, captures the raw poignancy so bitterly well – a mother in tears, ashes on her forehead and a pretty heart-shaped locket around her neck.



It breaks our hearts. And it breaks the heart of God, as well. That's what lies behind this morning's story about Noah and the ark and the flood.

We're coming in only at the end of it, but the whole of the story says that God, with a broken heart, tried to figure out how to fix all that had gone so horribly wrong. And rather than just throw the whole project away, God resolved to find a way to re-create the world as it was first intended to be. So God salvaged a bit of all that was so very good and tried over again.

It wasn't done lightly, nor was it carried out in anger or as an act of vengeance; but out of grief and sorrow. And when it was done, when the flood waters receded, God declared the whole creation good again ... and God told the animals to go forth out of the ark and multiply.

All of that comes before the opening verse of our first reading this morning. It seems that God is still heart-broken, this time by the horrific cost of what God had done in trying to set things right. And so God resolves never again to solve the problem of violence in our world with more violence from above. And God makes a pact with Noah and Noah's descendants ever after, along with every living creature, promising never again to destroy what God has made.

And then God says, "I have set my bow in the clouds ... a sign of the covenant between me the earth," as well as a reminder. It's not just a pretty rainbow; it's a cosmic weapon of battle.

As one commentator puts it:

To hang up one's bow is to retire from battle. That bow in the clouds is the sign of God's promise that ... destruction is off the table.

An implication of this promise is that God will try everything else. God will seek us and seek us ... God will not give up on loving us into restoration. ⁱ

That's the original force of the rainbow. No more arrows. No divine violence. Only love.

A few years back, a friend offered another way to think of rainbows. Imagine God standing with arms straight overhead, she said, and then bringing them slowly down on either side, leaving a perfect trail of every color all the way to the ground. This rainbow becomes a symbol of "God's permanent gesture towards us: outstretched arms and open hands."

Either way, the rainbow stands as God's resolve to love and embrace, never to destroy in anger.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ..." God created us – male and female ... And God gave everything that had been created into our care. God made us to care for the world and for one another. God made us to live in perfect harmony with one another and with this glorious creation.

It's never yet worked out quite according to plan, but God has never given up on us. And at least for the Church that's the backdrop to the good news of Jesus. Jesus comes to us as the incarnation of "God's permanent gesture towards us: outstretched arms and open hands."

In this morning's gospel, having been baptized by John, Jesus comes out of the water and is essentially told that his life is intertwined with God's eternal promises. Marks' account of what happens next is vague, at best, but it seems fair to surmise that Jesus learns to rely on the goodness of God to support and sustain him in the midst all that would test and threaten him.

And then Jesus returns, "proclaiming the good news of God ..." (I rather imagine him returning with "outstretched arms and open hands.") And Jesus calls on us to "repent" and "believe in the good news" ... or at least that's our translation of his invitation. But it's more ambitious than those words make it sound. Jesus is inviting us to give up on our cynicism for what can be done for this world and to join him in God's eternal longing to make everything right again.

Last week, we dedicated a set of six needlepoint panels – the work of a few dedicated artists wanting to give us a lovely depiction of the six days of creation. This week, this first Sunday in Lent, we are ALL called to dedicate ourselves to God's creation – not merely dedicating some idle moments to an art project to depict the beauty of creation as it was "in the beginning," but to take our part in re-creating it according to God's eternal plan for us all.

ⁱ Elizabeth Webb @ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=1&alt=1>.