

## *Height and Depth of Covenant*

Genesis 9: 8-17      Matthew 6: 1-8

Our journey into the season of Lent brings us a time for reflection, repentance, and redirection. Through any of a number of disciplines one might practice, we are encouraged to focus on what is truly sacred and transcendent in the context of our existence which is profane and worldly. Because these two spheres overlap in our lives and yet are exclusive domains in their own right, there is a constant pull and push of one over the other. We come into Lent recognizing the power of the profane and worldly to define and determine our spiritual lives, to disrupt and corrupt what God intended to be our strength and promise in life.

We start our journey in Genesis with Noah and the Flood. The Flood is God's answer to the problem of humans who seem to sin better than anything else. They excel at sin. This was not what God wanted when God created the human creature. The singular, basic thought gets stuck in God's divine sensibility that the best remedy for this flawed creature and the creation as a whole is to clean the slate, wipe out everything, and start all over again. It's a nice simple answer. But as with most nice simple answers, it badly underestimates the complexity of the issue and makes a colossal mess of the whole thing. Yes, God made a horrendous mess and will seem to admit as much.

God says in verse 11: *I establish my covenant with you. **Never again** will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; **never again** will there be a flood to destroy the earth.*

God has made what seems to be a difficult course correction. Having brought the Flood, God appears to have some severe second thoughts, some buyer's remorse, like maybe that wasn't such a good idea. Indeed, there has to be another way. After all, Noah and his family, as good and righteous as they are, are still human creatures. Humans can screw up in ways that confound even the Sovereign of all creation.

By the end of the Flood, God has decided on another path. God forms a covenant with Noah and with all humanity, and indeed **all life** – **not** just humans. The covenant has a few basic expectations from humans, spelled out before our passage – don't eat meat with its blood, and God will demand an accounting for the lifeblood of every animal and every human. *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.*

God's part of the covenant is no more floods. This promise is signed, sealed and delivered with the rainbow as God's signature.

It's interesting that God has decided to **limit** God's own capability for the sake of his human creation. God is likely hoping that this covenant will encourage greater attentiveness to righteousness by humans, anchoring commitment and discipline, resisting temptation and the compromise of righteousness. God hopes that the sacred and transcendent will become a guiding light for this creation, visible in the colors of the

rainbow to be celebrated by God's creation. While God has decided to refrain from a flood, God has **not** really done the anger management course yet. God can still get really ticked off and deliver a stunning zap.

The point is that God's covenant forms the future out of that calamity, creating a new promise of life for all humanity, for all creatures, for life. It's the beginning of God's covenantal relationship with us, outside of the Garden of Eden, to enable our living into God's promise for us. What is sacred and transcendent remains the challenge to the often unworthiness of the profane and worldly. The profane and worldly cannot be avoided or ignored, and neither can one truly live in the sacred and transcendent in this life. If one can tame the other, God's promise can be realized. Lent is about a season for such taming, and for the recovery of God's promise for all life.

The covenant model will go through a number of revisions and renewals over the centuries and into the time of Jesus' appearance. Then it becomes time once again for God to frame the covenant anew for God's people, and Jesus brings the good news.

Today's selection from Matthew 6 is part of the Sermon on the Mount, but not particularly well known. It is a lectionary text for Ash Wednesday consisting of a series of warnings about spiritual practices.

Spiritual practices are certainly at the heart of the Lenten season of reflection and repentance, or turning one's life in a new direction, better oriented to the promise of God over the allure of the promises of the world. Jesus recognizes that not all things done in the name of "spirituality" or "religious practice" are in and of themselves worthy for God's people. Here we find another instance of what is a continuous flow of criticism directed toward the

The first verse is like a general introduction when it refers broadly to "acts of righteousness." Here Jesus says: *Be careful **not** to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

Jesus continues this thought by picking out some particular ways that this happens. He continues: *So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when **you** give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Now we don't know that there were literally trumpets heralding any donors, but clearly these donors have made no secret of their gifts. Jesus names them "hypocrites." Their hypocrisy is in claiming that they are righteous before God. In fact, they truly esteem their standing of righteousness in the community, and particularly among worshipers in the synagogues. Here, piety toward God is merely a tool to show righteousness and superior standing before other mortals. God is being used.

Let's backtrack to when Jesus cast out the unclean spirits from the synagogue and recall how comfy-cozy the unclean (later named demonic) spirits were in their usual pews at the synagogue. They were regular attendees who blended right in with the culture and values of the synagogue. Yes, they may have been good donors, too.

Such donors have taken their reward – from their peers in the community and the synagogue. However, their fawning for acclaim for their donations means that God knows that faithfulness was not their motivation, denying them any further reward.

In the struggle between sacred and transcendent and the profane and worldly, this instance of almsgiving reveals that an otherwise good spiritual practice can be corrupted when hijacked by the profane and worldly, feeding selfish aims and worldly status rather than sacred righteousness.

Jesus then turns his attention to prayer. He calls attention once again to the hypocrites. Their prayer is **not** motivated by acts of faithfulness to God and God's will. Praying on street corners in loud wailing tones gets you great attention from onlookers who may be led to believe that the earnestness and the fervor of the prayer indicates one who is holy and righteous. In fact, Jesus declares, their prayers are exactly for that purpose: to gain status for their perceived piety and devotion. God isn't impressed.

The synagogue can also be a place for demonstrative prayers. A rabbi or worship leader may lead certain prayers during the Sabbath ritual, but there will be a time when the prayers of the people are presented. I remember attending a Sabbath service at an historic colonial-era, quite conservative synagogue in Manhattan. When the time came for the prayers of the people, everyone prayed at the same time. When you hear all of that from several hundred worshipers, you have a different take on the reference to "speaking in other languages" at Pentecost. It is an amazing sound, or cacophony of sound, with some praying joyously, some seriously, some loudly wailing. That occasion could also be a showplace for the one who wants to be seen as the best-est or most-est at praying to God. Jesus tells the faithful that the promise of such prayer has been lost in their posturing to seek status.

Then Jesus turns his attention from the hypocrites to the pagans or Gentiles. In the worship rituals to their gods, Gentile devotees were known to pray *ad nauseum* and often in tongues-like babble. It was all done in an attempt literally to wear out their god and cause their deity to relent and acquiesce just to shut up the people praying. (Okay, some Christians are known to do that, too.)

Those who follow Jesus should know differently and be grounded in faithfulness to God, knowing that God is faithful to the people of faith. Thinking that you can browbeat and manipulate God into submission is a complete corruption of prayer, too.

Then Jesus adds this: *For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* When we hear these words from Jesus, we might wonder: why are we praying *for* things if that's the case? Does that mean praying *for* things is unfaithful? We would be too literal with this to believe that. In the next section, Jesus will provide (the Matthew

version of) the Lord's Prayer which certainly bears a bunch of different petitions within it. What about prayer then? Well, Bruce has been thinking about doing a sermon focused on prayer, and maybe sometime during Lent, he'll get it done. But that's for another day.

We see in these (and other passages) how the profane and worldly can intrude on, seek to manipulate, and generally corrupt even well-intended acts of piety and devotion. Those who follow Jesus and profess faithfulness to God do well to remember the ease with which we can sinfully corrupt good intentions, and heed the Lord's counsel.

Generosity arising from a faith commitment needs no worldly acknowledgement or recognition, for the reward is in itself being sacred and transcendent. In the same way, prayer needs no worldly acknowledgement or recognition, for the reward is in itself being sacred and transcendent.

These are the dimensions of the struggle between the profane and worldly place of our residence and the pursuit of balance to bring the peace and promise only found in the sacred and transcendent. We are set forth on the Lenten journey to spiritual discovery and faithful renewal as God's promise is unburdened by the clutter and allowed to shine in our lives.