

Sermon for February 18, 2018 – “Thin Places”
First Sunday of Lent, Year B – Texts: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15
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The first reading is, obviously, the end of the well-known story. Noah has packed the ark with two of everything and they've spent months cooped up as the rains pounded outside and the flood waters covered the face of the earth. Then he sends the birds out, a raven and a dove. The raven disappears. The dove comes back. A week later Noah sends it out again and again, it comes back this time with an olive leaf. Noah sends it out a third time and it's bye-bye birdie! So, Noah assumes it's safe enough to park the ark and venture out. They begin to disembark from the ark probably wondering what they would find. And now God speaks. And God brings a new covenant, a new promise that from now on God will not do what God just did ever again. And the now-familiar sign appears for the first time, a rainbow. A bow in the clouds, a hint of color as the rains move away. A sign of the promise that God has made. God is literally hanging up His bow, a weapon of war. We understand the familiar rainbow as a sign, a sign of God's promise. We look at it and we smile. It's a sign that God will take care of us. In the Celtic tradition a rainbow is a threshold, a bridge between what is and what will be. It's another Celtic image of one of those “thin places.” There's a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only 3 feet apart but in the thin places that distance is even smaller. A thin place is where the veil between heaven and earth is lifted and one's able to receive a glimpse of the glory of God. A contemporary Irish poet gives this description...

Thin places, the Celts call this space
Both seen and unseen...
Where the door between the world
And the next is cracked open for a moment...
And the light is not all on the other side.
God shaped space...
Holy.

Is it any wonder, then, that thin places are most often associated with wild landscapes? A thin place requires us to step from one world to another and that often means traveling to a place where we've less control and the unpredictable is the means of discovery. These thin places are places where the air is so thin that what **will** be glimpsed **can** be glimpsed, if only for a moment.

Now we can either look at this story a couple of ways. We can look at it as a sort of children's story complete with rainbows and pairs of elephants and zebras, giraffes and hippopotamus', or we can look at it as one about a god who was so angry by his creation that he wiped it off the face of the earth. Truthfully, neither one works. Indeed, this is a story about rebellion and human sinfulness. (And to be honest, few bible stories aren't!) But the whole point is this that no matter how far the creation wandered from the Creator there was a calling back – a return, a reconciliation, an offering of love and forgiveness. A chance to begin again. Now, that's hard for us to fathom isn't it? Maybe because we're not good at offering each other “do-overs.” You know, that whole **forgiveness** thing.

I mean, how does God do this? We get the angry, wrathful God part but not so much the God who forgives, who offers grace and love and mercy. It is hard for us to imagine that no matter what we do, no matter how badly we screw up, God offers a chance to return. A chance to be recreated into something new, something only God can imagine. In fact, if you read the whole story, it was God who showed regret. At the end of chapter 8, God smells the pleasing odor of Noah's burnt offering. The second part of verse 21 tells us "...the Lord said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind..."...for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth..."Nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." It was God who changed the course of punishment regardless of how justified it may've been. It was God that offered a chance to begin again. That's what God does! God offers all of Creation a new beginning. But, just don't call it a "different" Creation. You see, God doesn't erase the chalkboard and start writing history again. Rather, God takes Creation as it is, sinful, rebellious, human, hurting, afflicted, and breathes grace and mercy in infinite measure into it so that **the** creation becomes a **new** Creation.

In her book, *Sacred Spaces*, Margaret Silf says this..."God rejoiced to see His Dream reborn. He desired to mark this moment eternally, as a sign of all creation that hope is more real and permanent than despair. He shone His perfect, invisible light, the light of joy through all the tears that would ever flow out of human grief and suffering. That invisible light was broken down, through our tears, into all the colors of the rainbow. And God stretched the rainbow across the heavens so that we might never forget the promise that holds all creation in being. This is the promise that life and joy are the permanent reality, like the blue of the sky, and that all the roadblocks we encounter are like the clouds, black and threatening perhaps – but never the final word. Because the final word is always 'Yes!'"

In our gospel reading, after his account of Jesus' baptism Mark then goes into the forty-day temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and a summary of Jesus' ministry. Mark tells us that the "heavens are torn apart." They've been ripped open. The barrier between heaven and earth is gone. Jesus here is the intersection, the bridge between the two. Jesus is the thin place, the threshold of God. Then Jesus departs into the desert immediately, Mark tells us, into the desert, the wildness, the wild landscape. Think about all the bible stories that take place in the wilderness. The one that probably comes to mind most often is the story of the Israelites wandering through the wilderness looking for the Promised Land, looking for freedom. In much the same way, Jesus is freed from the world in the wilderness and we with Him. Preparing for this freedom is a journey and involves struggle. For some the struggle is overwhelming but God is with us, leading us, likewise with the journey called Lent. During Lent, we often focus on the temptation fascinated as we sometimes are with "the Satan." But looking at it this new and different way, seeing it as a thin place, the desert becomes the threshold through which we journey. It is a time for preparation, a time for readying oneself to claim who God calls you to be, God's beloved child. And, the only choice one has is to repent, to turn around, to change.

In this passage, Jesus proclaims that "the time is fulfilled." It means the time is **now**. He will not use that language again until the Passion begins. Mark's Gospel story begins in the wilderness. John the Baptizer there in the wilderness. The Spirit had driven him there as it had driven Jesus there. Now, our version of the wilderness is often very difficult to grasp. I mean, we tend not to spend much time there and there aren't many places that are all that far from the conveniences of life, not in this country anyway.

In our world of perfectly manicured lawns and perfectly trimmed hedges, we usually do everything in our power to avoid the wilderness. Why? Well, we equate wilderness with some sort of deprivation and, thus, a loss of power. We do everything we can to see that our lives stay exactly where we want them. The wilderness is the thing that we are always trying to run from, to avoid at all costs. The wilderness doesn't fit into our carefully thought-out plans. As for Jesus, well, He didn't see the wilderness as deprivation as much as He saw it as an emptying of Himself before God. In fact, if you think about it, Jesus' baptism propelled Him into the wilderness. Maybe that's our problem. Maybe we missed our wilderness. Maybe we missed our emptying. An emptying that would put us in touch with what we really need and nothing more. See, without our stuff we're vulnerable, and thank God! For when we're powerless, when we're vulnerable, where do we go? We look to the only place we know. That's what happens when you get lost in the wilderness. you get out your compass, you re-orient yourself against a fixed point – Jesus Christ. That's when you become acutely aware of His presence. Because, it's only when we've truly emptied ourselves that God can fill us with God. It's only when we've stripped away all of our preconceptions that we meet Christ where He is and find Him to be right there with us! It's only then that we're nourished and fed by those things for which our souls **truly** hunger and thirst.

These forty days are our emptying time. **This** is how we grow. **This** is what Lent is, a pilgrimage through an intentional wilderness, a thin place.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.