

The Rev. Andria Skornik
Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2021

Not Why, But Where

This morning I just want to acknowledge some of what we've been going through this last week. Last Sunday we did the service remotely since people couldn't get out of their homes due to the ice and snow. Many in our parish didn't have power or were hosting people who didn't. Some still are without it. There's the damage caused by fallen trees. Stores and businesses had to shut down. As I heard someone say, it feels like we're living from one catastrophe to the next.

And here we are. The first Sunday in the season of Lent.

Lent is associated with wilderness. We read about how Jesus was tested in the wilderness or how the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. In past years, we've talked about our "going into the wilderness" in Lent. But in the Hebrew tradition, the wilderness wasn't a place you'd go into willingly. The wilderness was considered a dangerous place, not fit for human habitation.

Lent is also identified with the number 40. The season itself is 40 days. It harkens back to 40 days and 40 nights Noah and his family spent on the ark. Or how Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days. Or how the Israelites were in the wilderness 40 years. The reason for these repetitions of 40, though, isn't that they all happened to be 40 days as we count time. But rather, in the Hebrew tradition, 40 was symbolic of something that felt like forever.

The wilderness. 40 days. A hard place that feels like forever. As we come upon the year anniversary of the pandemic we can relate. This year there is no gearing up to enter into this season. We have been in Lent for a year now.

So how does our faith help us?

If we look at our reading from Genesis, the answer, on the face of it, may be unsettling. The passage is part of the flood story, where God sends a natural disaster to end humanity because people were doing terrible things. God had regrets in creating them, and the solution was not to help them, but destroy them. If we were to read our own situation with this filter, the implication of why we're going through all these things isn't so good.

But there's another way of looking at this story.

As clergy colleague, the Rev. Maria McDowell, pointed out, in Hebrew scripture there's a pattern. Almost like a back and forth, inner dialogue in the text of coming to terms with who God

is. Sometimes the dialogue is with the other religions of ancient Mesopotamia whose gods were typically portrayed as exacting, retributive and fickle. The people were always figuring out how to appease these gods with offerings, ritual, or doing just the right thing. So in the text we see a recurring theme that says other gods are this way, but OUR God, the God of Israel, is like this. In other words, YOUR gods are controlled by the stars. OUR GOD created the stars. YOUR gods demand sacrifice. OUR God provides the sacrifice. YOUR gods are impersonal and removed, OUR God knows every hair on our head and calls us each by name.

At other times, this inner dialogue is one that God even weighs in on. God is understood or portrayed in one way and then God responds back, I'm not that way. I don't want what other gods want. I don't want the things the human ego wants that you assign to me. I am radically other. We see this in our Ash Wednesday readings every year where God says, I want mercy not sacrifice. I don't want your elaborate shows of piety, I want your love. And I want you to love each other.

Walter Bruegemann has said, at the heart of Israel's belief system is a God who is merciful, compassionate, steadfast in love, tenaciously faithful and forgiving (Exodus 34:6-7). So what's being wrestled with all the time is people coming to terms with this new paradigm of a God who is so different from the gods around them and even from their own expectations of what a god would be like.

The flood story is a great example. If you look at other religions in this time they also had similar flood stories, which means that people were trying to make sense of a terrible thing that had happened, the dominant theory being that it was punishment. In that sense the story of Noah in Genesis fits right in.

But our passage today adds a part of the story that is unique. God makes a covenant with the people never to do the same thing again. That's not in the other flood stories. And what if it's not just God saying, I won't do it again, which still leaves the terrible idea that God did it the first time, but rather an example of that back and forth wrestling of who God is?

What if we read this story as if the first part is the set up, and then today's passage is the contrasting response? As if to say, yes, there was a terrible flood, and people have thought it was God's punishment, but OUR God is not that way. Our God promises covenant; relationship. Our God has bound godself to us and to all future generations forever.

People have always looked to divinity for answers. Trying to understand the cause, or why terrible things like floods happen. Why did God do this? Why would God allow this? If we can't be in control, it helps us to believe in a God who controls everything.¹ But that's not what covenant is about. It's not about God controlling things, but rather, God reaching out to us in

¹ The Rev. Maria McDowell

relationship; seeking our participation, friendship, and to join God in the work of co-creation. We don't always know why bad things happen, but we do know our God has promised to be with us in them no matter what. As the Psalmist says, there is nowhere I could go that you would not be.

It's even like what we see in our gospel reading of Jesus in the wilderness. It says the angels waited on him, which was at times a reference in scripture to God coming. God was with Jesus in the wilderness. In his hard time that felt like forever. And as we look ahead to Holy Week, where all of this is headed, this plays out to the full extent on Good Friday, where the question of why — why would God allow Jesus to die — comes up. Some have said it's because God needed a sacrifice — God's way of aligning all the pieces so that God could get humanity off the hook for its wickedness once and for all. But in following the pattern of who this God is in contrast to other gods, in contrast to our retributive notions of God based in the human ego, the cross is not God causing and controlling. It is when the world is at its worst, God saying I will die with you. I will go to hell and back, but I will never leave you until there is resurrection. These are the very things symbolized in baptism.

OUR God is a God who promises presence and relationship. At all times. Forever. So then the question when we find ourselves in chaos and catastrophe is not why. It's where. Not why would God do that or why would God allow that to happen. But *where* is God? And we know the answer. God is there with us. There is nowhere we can go, nothing that can happen in which God will not be there.

To make our focus on *where* God is is an act of spiritual attunement. When we are overwhelmed, looking for answers, feeling lost or depleted, what if we shut our eyes and took a few deep breaths to become aware of God's presence and stay there as long as we need before we move on? Knowing God is with us like God was with Jesus in the wilderness and on the cross. And like Jesus, it is in those hard places we discover the depths of what it means to be with God, and to be one with God.

We serve a God of love and life who has promised to be with us wherever we go. That's who our God is. We don't have to go into the wilderness this year. We're already here. But our God is too.

Other Influential Sources

<https://cac.org/a-credo-of-adjectives-2016-02-03/>

Clergy Colleague Conversation, February 16, 2021