

To Bring You to God  
Rev. Nicole Farley  
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
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**Genesis 9:8-17**

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

**1 Peter 3:18-22**

<sup>18</sup>For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup>in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup>who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup>And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup>who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

We have entered Lent, those forty days which lead up to Easter. As nicely explained on the PC(USA) website: “The season of Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and self-examination in preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of the Lord at Easter. It is a period of 40 days — like the flood of Genesis, Moses’ sojourn at Mount Sinai, Elijah’s journey to Mount Horeb, Jonah’s call to Ninevah to repent and Jesus’ time of testing in the wilderness. (The Sundays in Lent are not counted in this reckoning of the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter, as every Lord’s Day is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.)”<sup>1</sup> You may have been wondering how Noah came into the picture today – in part, because of the connection to the forty days into which we have entered.

The amazing thing about the Noah story, which we sometimes overlook in its familiarity, are the details of the covenant between God and the people. God says, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth...When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/worship-resources-lent/>

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. 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.” We get very clearly God’s part of the deal but note: God makes no demands of us. In true God-style, there are no conditions on God’s promise. That is amazing to us who have common phrases like “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine” and “return the favor.”

The world had become a mess before the flood, not dissimilar from the state of our world today. Despite God’s repeated attempts to draw our attention back to God, we went on with our own ways, making ourselves gods above God – to begin with, eating forbidden fruit so we can know what God knows. Earlier than today’s reading in Genesis we can read: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually...Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.”<sup>2</sup> What did God desire but that the people turn back to God?

The covenant which God makes is God’s promise to always seek us, no matter how frequently or actively we turn away. Between this time of covenant-making and our reading from 1 Peter are generations of people who put God to the test, ignoring God, seriously misunderstanding God, rejecting God. If God were us, God would have given up on us a long time ago. Fortunately for us, God is God and so God only tries harder. What does that look like? Well, incarnation. And, beyond incarnation, submitting God’s self to the horrible death we as people plotted and carried out. All to “bring us to God.”

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were all to bring us to God. In life, Jesus strove to teach us the ways in which we had misunderstood and misappropriated God’s love. In death, Jesus showed us that God’s love for us was beyond our imaginations. And through the resurrection, the only barrier keeping us from God in the life eternal – death – was destroyed. What does all of this have to do with Lent? Why do we have these readings on our first Sunday in Lent?

Lent is often accompanied by a focused intentionality on repentance, on reorienting ourselves toward God. We engage in disciplines which bring us closer to God; we refrain from activities which naturally pull us away from God. We examine our lives for the places where God might mourn the inclinations of our hearts and we seek to make changes. And we do this for several weeks. My own theory? In the course of those weeks we realize how difficult it is, how impossible it is, to come to God by ourselves, and the realization of those weeks makes us that much more grateful for the sacrifice

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 6:5, 11.

which Jesus made for us and for the gift that we have been given in the resurrection, a gift we become more keenly aware we could never earn.

Yesterday, at the presbytery's Discovery Day, I taught a workshop to new ruling elders and one of my resources was a great book by Joan S. Gray, called *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook*. Her book is filled with wisdom, intended for ruling elders and deacons but truly applicable for anyone trying to follow Christ. This quote in particular resonates with me today: "...when we operate out of our weakness, we leave God plenty of room to work. We are much more aware of God's power enabling us to do what we could never do by ourselves. The focus is on God *much* more than on us."<sup>3</sup> Lent is a journey toward God, another way to bring us to God, and I believe our ever-growing awareness of how much we need God, and how much God has given us without merit, certainly stirs within us gratitude and a yearning to be ever closer to God.

The areas where we lack are not to serve as discouragement. Instead, Gray, advising wisely about spiritual leaders (of which we are all capable of being), writes that those people "are able to see weaknesses and lack as an invitation for God to great things in them and in the church."<sup>4</sup> Instead of stubbornly insisting we must get it right on our own, what if we looked at our attempts and then allowed ourselves to rely upon God to fill in where we cannot? Perhaps this is the closest we can come to God in this life – an acknowledgment and acceptance of our need for God. As you walk these forty days, no matter which Lenten discipline or disciplines you take on, may your goal not be a mastery of the discipline but, instead, a move toward God. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: May we allow ourselves to be brought to you, O God, we pray. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Joan S. Gray, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2009) p. 119

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.