

The Covenant with Noah

First Sunday in Lent, 22 February 2015: Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-9, I Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

I admit that the Great Litany is an odd custom. This is not something you see every day. It comes from a long time ago. Sadly, today, it invites caricature – the chanting monks from Monty Python processing in their gray robes come to mind, or a nasally priest chanting “Good Lord deliver us.”

But the strangeness and discomfort it invokes are precisely why we offer this old prayer on this day, the first Sunday in Lent.

First a bit of history. Litanies are an ancient practice, predating Jesus, probably predating Israel. They are found in the psalms as well as in other religious traditions. In early times communities would often gather to pray in this way in times of fear or disaster, to ask God’s mercy and compassion.

Different forms of litanies, most in Latin, were floating around the Christian church in the 1500’s when Thomas Cranmer decided to write services for the church in English. The Great Litany was the first service he published. He gathered litanies from many sources, combined them, and translated them into English. He even included a prayer about the Pope: “Deliver us from the tyranny of the Bishop of Rome and all his detestable abnormities.” Thankfully, that part was edited out over the years. We used an updated version published a few years ago, but even with the changes we consider this the oldest liturgical prayer in English.

We could treat the Great Litany as a museum piece – get it out every year on the first Sunday in Lent, dust it off, put it on display. But that is not our intention today.

We pray this old, old form of prayer to remind us of God’s covenant with us.

That covenant has been present from the very beginning of time, predating all litanies. God’s covenant with us is the foundation of our faith and hope. Over the next three Sundays we will look at central stories of covenant in the Old Testament – God’s covenant with Noah, with Abraham and Sarah, and with all the people of Israel.

We begin with Noah. The story of Noah is usually told in a tame and domestic way. It is one of the foundational stories we tell children – that Noah built a big boat and gathered all the animals in the ark until the rains stopped and the rainbow came out. It sounds like a cross between the spring rains and a Wild Animal Safari cruise.

But the version we tell children leaves out a key detail in the story. God sent the flood on purpose to destroy all creation. God had had it with human beings. Genesis 6 reads like this

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. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."

According to this story things were pretty bad between humans and God. And God's first response was destruction. But after the flood something changed. God promised never to use destruction again. The rainbow was a sign, not just to humans but to God, of God's care for all creation.

Granted this is one of those stories in the Bible that may not be intended as a literal account of geological history. This is sacred myth, but that does not mean it is not true. Sacred myth is a gift of tremendous truth that may or may not have happened that way. The truth in this disturbing story is that God had and has every right to be frustrated with creation, frustrated enough to destroy us. As we say in one of our Eucharistic prayers – *we violated your creation abused one another and rejected your love. And yet you never ceased to care for us.* There is something in the very nature of God that won't allow God to destroy us in anger. God preserved Noah and the animals through the flood. And God promised never to destroy us again.

Actually, God did more than promise. God established a covenant. In the Ancient Near East a covenant was a legal treaty that cemented a relationship, often between a greater power and a lesser power. It usually spelled out a series of mutual obligations. Notice, however, that in this covenant with Noah, God promised to do all the heavy lifting. No obligations were placed on Noah at all. God established an everlasting covenant with every living creature of all flesh on the whole earth with no conditions.

Can you wrap your mind around that for just a minute? The God of all creation so loves and cherishes creation that God has promised to be in relationship with us no matter what. Later covenants with Abraham and Israel will spell out benefits for creation for keeping up certain ends of the deal, but the beginning of it all is here – God's sincere, loving, unmerited favor toward all creation.

And this has profound implications for us today. Maybe human beings have always been like this, but it seems that 21st Century westerners are particularly shaped by the performance principle. We measure our worth by what we do, how well we do it, and what we contribute. But God's covenant with Noah reminds us that God's initiative towards us precedes anything we do.

So The Great Litany, and our confession of sin, and all our prayers are not about begging God to love us or spare us or deign to hear us. They are like the rainbow, helping us remember that God hears, cares, and reaches out to us in love no matter what.

During this season of Lent we are sincerely asking God to transform and restore us. Those who came on Ash Wednesday heard me talk about Da Vinci's Last Supper, a masterpiece that had been damaged over the years by climate, an unstable surface, and human history. A 20 year restoration project restored some of the original glory, revealing more the artist's original intention.

During Lent we work with God to restore some of our original glory. The holy habits of prayer, worship, and service to others are the tools of God's restoration work. They strip away the layers of sin and dirt and destruction that have come upon us. They help us see God's image in us and in others. We are inviting people to try to pray 20 minutes a day, worship 1 hour a week, and serve 5 hours a month. 2015. I promise if you do this you'll find yourself changed and transformed.

But the starting place for all of this is God. The beginning of our prayer, in great litanies or in private, the beginning of our worship, the beginning of our service is God - God's first covenant to renew and restore life rather than destroy it.

All praise and thanks to you, most merciful Father, for adopting us as your own children, for incorporating us into your holy Church, and for making us worthy to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. Amen. (BCP 311)

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