

First Sunday in Lent February 18 2024

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

We are looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians for our Lent Study and there are two main things Paul is trying to do in that letter.

First, to describe who Jesus (and therefore who God) is. What sets this God we follow apart from all the other gods humans devote themselves to.

Second, what that understanding of who God is means for those who follow the God who comes to us in Jesus. What sets us apart from those who follow other gods.

That can be a helpful lens to look at our texts this morning.

In our text from Genesis, we come at the end of the story of Noah and the ark. The God who created all that exists, has called it good, and called God's capstone of creation- human beings- very good, has just done a hard reboot of the world after it was corrupted seemingly beyond repair. God has preserved Noah and his family (who have continued in right relationship with God) along with the source code for all of the created world and wiped the rest in the flood. A blotting out of this corrupted system.

There are several things we learn about this God. First, God is willing to adapt God's relationship with creation. God was convinced the flood was the way to go forward. But in this covenant- God promises- not just to Noah and his family, but to all of creation- never again to deal with the world in this way. Second is that

God is willing to bind Godself to humans and to creation in a covenant. A legally binding relationship of promises and responsibilities. This was a form known to the Israelites- it is the kind of agreement one made between a superior and an inferior. God is willing to enter into that kind of agreement.

Finally, that from this moment on, God will never again give up on all of creation. Instead, God has found something redeeming in everyone. Something worth pursuing not destroying.

The God who created all that exists has bound Godself to relationship with us and all of creation. A relationship that comes out of the flood waters. God limits God's own powers for the sake of humans and all creation.

The Psalmist talks about God's ways and paths. The character of God. God's ways are compassion, steadfast love, faithfulness, gracious and just. All of this in contrast to the ways in which we as humans treat each other. The steadfast love of God is called *chesed* in Hebrew. This is a rich word that Bible scholar Darrell L. Bock says wraps, "up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty—in short, acts of devotion and loving-kindness that go beyond the requirements of duty." God's word to us is sure. God's love for us is unwavering. God sticks with God's promise even beyond our own walking away from it. This is who the God we follow is.

In this way, God is unlike any of the gods humans turn to. Here I mean gods defined as Martin Luther did in his Small Catechism. The things we fear, love and trust the most. The things worth devoting our lives to. That we believe will save us. Will give us life fuller and more abundant.

Too often, when these gods wear human faces, they are leaders, celebrities, who do not display chesed. Who are not faithful to those who follow them. Who seek only fame, fortune, power, for themselves. Or the gods we devote ourselves to are things/ideas- power, influence, money. Collecting stuff or experiences.

The God we follow is the one the author of 1 Peter reminds us, sent God's own son into the world. The beloved come to tell us after so many failures about the way to the reign of God. The way out of the reign of this world which can be alright for a time, or for a few, but which time and again has led us back into war, disease, distrust. The good time of the reign of this world cannot last.

The God we follow, the God who has claimed us as beloved in the waters of baptism, is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness to us. Who goes above and beyond to bring justice, peace, grace to all of creation. Not just us. Not just our kind. Not just those with the same political views, or account balance, or background. God's chesed is for all whom God has created.

And yet...

It is only within the bounds of this covenant with God, walking within the ways and paths of God, following along behind Jesus that we experience fully that reign of God.

What then does it mean for us that this is the God we worship?

It means that in our relationship with God we are faithful in the same way God is faithful. This does not mean there will not be arguments, trials, tribulations. Just read the scriptures. Humans have been talking back to God from the beginning. Abraham argues with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. The psalms are

filled with those who ask God where he is in the midst of their suffering. Job argues his case against God about his own suffering. God can handle the conversation.

But in each of those psalms-even down to psalm 22 which Jesus quotes on the cross- for all their calling God to account they always turn back to trust. Trust in the God they know from experience, through their parents and grandparents, through the faithful witness of scripture. A God who is steadfastly loyal. Who can be counted on. And we trust that. We rest in that.

That this is the character of the God we worship also means this is how we live in relationship with one another. Showing each other love, mercy, grace, covenant loyalty. That we stick with one another, even when they seem to turn from us. That we see in others the same value and worth that God sees in us. And so we do not give up on them, but pursue their good.

Yet, we have not always seen this kind of living by the church writ large or even in the church writ small.

I am continually frustrated when I hear people from someone on social media, to my students at my class in UD, to folks on the street talk about how Christians believe you have to be perfect to be one of them, or they're about hating people, and I want to shout out- No! We are not all defined by those things and people we reject. No, there is not anyone who is outside God's love and care. The covenant of God in Genesis is with all creation.

This is us as the church at our worst. When the siren call of those other gods blocks out our ability to hear God and we turn to the things of this world.

I am frustrated, because I do it too. Because we live in this tension between what is and what should be. I'm so proud of us for raising \$190,000 to pay down our loan- we hope to have details to you soon about the refinance. But I also am torn by the fact that we have had to focus time and attention on that. Not on how we discern and live out our calling as a people of God here in this place.

This is one of the gifts of Lent. It's a bit like those 40-day challenges that were all the rage a few years ago. It provides a limited time frame for us to really focus on this area of our lives. A manageable amount of time.

To consider-

God in baptism has claimed me. Called me beloved. Marked me with the sign of the cross- gifted me with the Holy Spirit and abilities and skills in a way unique to me.

Am I living my life in relationship to others with the same grace, love, and mercy that God has shown me? Am I keeping my 8th commandment attitude and looking at what others do in the best possible way?

If I am not, why not? What are the things that hold me back? How can I pray to God and ask for help in changing?

God in baptism has claimed me. Called me beloved.

Am I living my life in relationship to God with the same steadfast love and faithfulness that God has for me. Or, am I stepping out on God? Sharing my devotion with someone or something else?

If so, why am I doing that? What do I think it gains me?

How can I pray to God with the same boldness of the father of the epileptic boy-
“I believe, help my unbelief!”?

God in baptism has claimed us and called us together to be an outpost of God’s
reign on earth. A visible sign of what Jesus says he has come to bring near.

Are we living up to that calling as a community? Where do we fall short? How
might we so live our lives that we better embody that which God has called and
equipped us to do and be?

A lot of questions. A lot of soul searching.

But what better time to do so than during this journey with Jesus to the cross that
is Lent. To see once again the story laid out for us in our readings today. Of a God
who continually reaches out to be in relationship with us, to call us to a way of life
that will bring life fuller and more abundant for everyone. A life that seeks to heal
others, to feed others, to make sure they too have that full and abundant life. Of
a God who loves us in all our imperfection and messiness enough to send God’s
own Son. That we might listen to him.

Who in baptism loves us from death back into life.

Let us take these next 40 days and exercise our spiritual muscles. Let’s spend
time in scripture reading Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Let’s spend time in
prayer- asking for God’s strength in places we are weak, for God’s guidance in
places we are lost. Let’s spend time in fellowship- practicing being the outpost of
the reign of God we are called to be.

So that, at the end of these 40 days, we might have a clearer sense of who God is and what God means in our lives. That we might better be an outpost of that reign of God. That we might fully experience the joy of loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves.