

Genesis 9:8-17 1 Lent 2.18.23 Bill Uetricht

When I was growing up, we had a cat named Snowball. Like many cats, she was remarkably aloof. She was not the cuddly sort. But she was fascinating. Whenever we opened the refrigerator, she would place her paws on the part of the refrigerator that divided the top section from the freezer, and would look around at the food, as if she were choosing what she wanted for dinner.

When I got a little older, we had a dog; her name was Pooh. Bev says that she had bad breath. I don't remember that so much, but she was a great dog. She didn't bark much, and she was fun to have on your lap.

After Bev and I married, and even after we had kids, we didn't have any animals. We didn't want the trouble. Bev had had a pony when she was young, and honestly, according to her, Ginny was a pain, just a lot of work. Yes, I liked our animals when I was growing up. But when we were married and raising kids, I didn't want the bother: the smelly carpet, the hair all over the place, the need to be home to let the dog out, and the necessity to find pet care when you want to travel. I was grateful that for a while our son Jacob was content to have a pet rat. Petunia was capable of staying home all by herself.

Truthfully, I have always been a people person, not an animal person. I like to be with people. People energize me. And yes, I can say they don't wet the carpet—generally.

The focus of my life has always been people. The focus of my theology, my reflection on God and life, has always been *people*. I have always liked what the author of First John claims: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and yet hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they cannot see." People are at the center of

the gospel, the center of the message of good news. Loving them is at the center of our calling. I think I have good Biblical justification for such a contention.

Today's reading from Genesis has gotten me thinking, though. This text gives us the first covenant in the Bible, the first of three that we will consider in Lent. And this is a covenant that is not just with people. Listen to the words of Genesis:

Then God said to Noah, and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing a covenant with you and your descendants after you, 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. 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.

Wow! This covenant of God is not just with and for the sake of people. It's a covenant with everything. It's a covenant with Pooh and Snowball, Petunia, and Amos, a dog we got later in our lives, who really tested our patience with the wetting of carpets, yet whose death caused us to cry profusely. God is making a covenant with everybody and everything.

You see, God had had a little temper tantrum. It's called the flood. God had become so ticked off at the world. (The Genesis stories are so fun and fanciful.) He had created everything. And he had put people in the garden so that they would have fun. They didn't want to have fun; they wanted to keep score. Things really went downhill. The situation gets so bad, and this is the part you don't often hear about, that representatives from the heavenly realm get involved. Some angelic figures (and yes, this is in the Bible, Genesis chapter 6) look at the women of the earth with lust and

decide that they want to come down and....*get to know them*. Well, they get to know them so well that they produce a race of giants. As I have pointed out many times before, the Bible thinks that tall people have their origin in the heavenly realm.

Well, God now is mega-ticked off. The heavenly and the earthly realms that are supposed to stay separate have become entwined. Everything has gone to pot. And God is wroth, very wroth. And then God regrets having made the world and human beings. They all have to go. And so, God sends the flood, the great flood of judgment. Of course, he's God and truthfully, although it doesn't seem so at the moment of the flood, he has a soft spot inside him. So, he decides to save one family and two of each kind of all the animals on the earth who are to enter the ark. (Frankly, he could have left off the snakes and the mosquitoes. But he didn't.)

Well, after the flood, though, God has deep regret. He grieves what he did. He repents of it. For those of you who need a God who is forever the same, who never changes the divine mind, who has no emotions, who is simply a matter of predictability, don't read the Old Testament. In the Old Testament God is so serendipitous, wild and unpredictable, emotional, full of passion. God grieved over his temper tantrum. And now he says that tantrum was a mistake. *Never again* will he flood the whole earth. *Never again* will he bring about total annihilation. God will have to find a new way of dealing with the problem of sin and evil. He will limit his power. (Oh man, this is an interesting notion of God, and I would say, of being human, if indeed we are to reflect who God is.) God limits God. Terry Fretheim says that God has chosen to take the route of suffering relative to sin, rather than destructive power. God will enter the pain of this crazy world.

Wow! And this promise is a promise to everything, not just to people. Everything. All birds. All domestic animals. Every animal of the earth. Those on the extinction list. Those on the endangered list. And can I also say, all of creation? The rocks, the water, the fauna, the land, the dirt. Everything. Before we hear about God's concern and commitment to people—next week Abraham and the following week, the nation of Israel—we hear of his concern and commitment to everything and everybody. God may get angry, but he is deeply in love with everything.

This is a vision that we need for this very moment. Our suffering earth cries out for this vision. Mistreated animals cry out for this vision. Polluted waterways cry out for this vision. God has a special place in God's heart for everything.

Concern for a warming planet, care for wounded animals, a commitment to eat more food from natural sources and local farmers, a desire to eat less food from factory farms, dedication to cleaning up Bear Lake and Muskegon Lake, is not a matter just for snowflakes, for gentle tree huggers. It is a matter of faith for those of us who know about the covenant with Noah, his descendants, and everything. To trust the covenant of Noah is to work on behalf of a hurting planet, suffering animals, and yes, suffering people. God is in the business not of annihilation, but life. *Our* business is a life business, a life business for everything. Everything matters in this big ecosystem called creation. Pooh, Snowball, Petunia, Amos, Ginny, Lake Michigan, Muskegon River, the oceans, the whales, the land, the polar bears, the ice caps, the rain forests, the tundra, lions, orangutans, those smelly skunks, those pesky squirrels and chipmunks, and maybe even the snakes and the mosquitoes—they all belong; they all matter. They, too, are included in the promise of God.

(A video of animals from Africa was played.)

We start Lent with a giant promise from God to all creation. It's an interesting starting place. After all, I thought we were heading to the cross. It makes sense that we would start in the wilderness, as Mark does and Jesus does, that we would start with the struggle that is life. It makes sense that we would start with John the Baptist being "handed over, delivered," arrested, as Jesus will be handed over just before he is killed. But start with the wonder and glory of creation?

The Gospel writer John in one of the best-known passages of the Bible, one we will receive in a few weeks, says: "God so the loved *world* that he gave his only son." The world. The cosmos. Everybody. Everything. Jesus will end up on the cross because the world (everything) is a mess. God has made a covenant with everything. The cross of Jesus and the resurrection that will follow are good news for everything, or they are not good news for anything.