

Genesis 9:8-17 Pastor Bill Uetricht 1 Lent 2.18.21

Every Ash Wednesday I am taken by the reaction of many people, especially young people, to the significance of the day. Many of them will tell me that this is one of the most important days to them in the church year. Why, I wonder?

I think one of the reasons is Ash Wednesday's use of visual symbols. We live in a culture dominated by words. A simple visual symbol speaks volumes in a culture sometimes wearied by words.

The primary reason, though, I am convinced, that Ash Wednesday has such an appeal has to do with its rawness, its realness, its authenticity. We live in a culture, frankly, that can be so inauthentic. Even though the pandemic has done its best to unsettle our inauthenticity, we are a culture of the Kardashians and the Bachelor. We are a people who focus on lives driven by power, money, prestige, looks--even if they are artificially created. There is so much that is not authentic about modern life. And Ash Wednesday says "a pox" on all of that, causing many of us to breathe a sigh of relief because we know that life is much deeper and rawer than that. We long for authenticity, for the real!

Perhaps you notice that I do a lot of preaching on Old Testament texts, and I do so because they are so real. Yes, sometimes they are disturbing. And yes, sometimes they can be less than helpful. But the Old Testament is raw. It's honest. It's authentic in its portrayal of the human condition, life, and even God. And it's the latter I note in today's reading from Genesis. What we have today is the end of the Noah story.

Now as you well know, there is a lot that precedes this ending, a lot of negative stuff that we have to experience before we get to what appears to be a happy ending. The story starts with God's ticked-off-ness. He's mad for having made everything. To figure out what puts

him over the edge, you must read the bizarre story in Genesis six about some angelic beings who lust after beautiful women on the earth. They are so driven by their lust that they come to the earth and impregnate these women. Yes, very weird! But let's be honest. Real! What's more real than lust?

To the God of the writer of this folklorish narrative, life is meant to be separated out. The only way to keep things in order is to make sure that things that shouldn't mix don't mix. Perhaps you remember in the creation narrative that God establishes borders (firmaments) that keep the waters that are above from mixing with the waters that are below. This prevents a big flood. Well, guess what? Because God is so ticked off that the heavenly realm and the earthly realm are mixing, that the boundaries of life have been destroyed, he decides to let the waters loose. And what do we get? A big flood! A mess! He is so mad. God has decided to destroy everything—well, almost everything, everything except for a remnant. For some reason, Noah and his family find favor with God. And there also seems to be a soft spot in God's heart for the animals. He saves two of each kind of them.

Today's reading is the aftermath of the flood, the aftermath of God's temper tantrum. As God announces his covenant with Noah, he speaks of the change in his heart. See what I mean by the Old Testament being so real. God says today, "Never again. Never again am I going to do that. Never again shall there be a flood that will destroy the whole earth."

God changes God's mind. There really is no evidence that the humans on the earth have gotten their act together, have changed as he wanted them to. As Walter Brueggemann says, "What has changed is God. God has made a decision about the grief and trouble of his own heart." God now is going to deal with the world differently. Again, as Brueggemann says, "God's creation is for all time protected from God's

impatience.” And what is going to help God deal with his own impatience is the bow, perhaps the rainbow. That will be like the strings we tie around our fingers to remind us to do something. Whenever he sees that rainbow, he will be reminded not to allow his anger to get too hot.

Such realness. Such authenticity. Such grace. This story is fundamentally about the grace of God. It is a gracious covenant that runs the universe. Oh, don't get me wrong. God is not some smiling philanthropist that puts up with everybody's shenanigans. God is ticked off by the things we do sometimes. But God's heart is ultimately shaped by his covenant of grace.

And I must make this point about grace. Grace is only necessary in a world of wildness, of realness, of unpredictable humans and even unpredictable heavenly beings. Do you notice that some of the least gracious people are those—and many of them are religious—who work hard to eliminate the wildness, whose goal it is, it seems, to put on a good front, to make life look like peaches and cream, one smiley emoticon after another. But our God is much more real than that, much more authentic, which is why grace is God's operational principle, God's covenant with *the whole world*.

And note that. God's covenant of grace is not just limited to human beings. “Then God said to Noah and his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my 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 dark.’” Now personally, I think he could have left the mosquitoes and the snakes off the ark, but he didn't consult me! God's covenant is with everybody and everything. Grace is not simply about dealing with your wildness and your brokenness. Grace has to do with

God's orientation with everything that exists. God's promise is to the mosquitos, the crickets, the dogs, the cats, the cows, and the lambs.

Native American Kaitlin Curtice says this: "The bloodline of God is connected to everything . . . shells on the ocean shore, the mushrooms growing in the forest, the trees stretching to the clouds, the tiniest speck of snow in the winter, and our dust-to-dustness—we are all connected and tethered to this sacred gift of creation."

The covenant of grace includes everything. The really real, the authentic is discovered in everything, which is why some of the most authentic people are those who get off their couches, leave behind their computers, put to rest their phones and play in the playground, which is the created world. You can't remain enamored with Hollywood wealth and manufactured beauty or with Washington D.C. pretend power after you have been grasped by the majesty of the blue ice of Lake Michigan, or sat under the grandness of the sequoias in California, or stuck your toes in the awe-inspiring sand at Silver Lake or Sleeping Bear Dunes, or lay on your back to take in the panorama of the galaxy. These reveal the real. These put us in our place. These make it clear that life is bigger than us, bigger than our puny preoccupations with power, prestige, and pretend perfection. Life is one massive covenant of grace. Life is a gift from a real God whose heart is shaped in the end not by his anger, but by his generosity.

To live authentically in response to this God is to become generous ourselves. Generosity is the only move that makes sense when we are real and when life is lived in light of grace.

The Pottawatomi Indians have a practice of placing a common bowl of real berries with one spoon in it whenever they are involved in a community rite. The berries are passed around so that everyone can taste the sweetness of the earth, so that they can know that God's covenant is a covenant of goodness.

As the berries are circulated, members of the tribe pay attention to not take too many berries because they are aware that the bowl can become empty or as my Mom used to say when I was a kid, “when it’s gone it’s gone.” For the Pottawatomis, the well-being of one is linked to the well-being of all. The sweetness of the gift is to be savored by all. The generosity of Mother Earth is meant for all. In other words, the generosity of God is to lead to our generosity.

But it’s true. Even if we don’t take too many, the bowl will become empty. So how is the bowl refilled? Gratitude can’t refill the bowl. Robin Wall Kimmerer says, “The berries trust that we will uphold our end of the bargain and disperse their seeds to new places to grow. They remind us that all flourishing is mutual. We need the berries and the berries need us. Their gifts multiply by our care for them and dwindle from our neglect. We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility to sustain those who sustain us.”

God’s covenant with Noah includes all people and all things. “The bloodline of God is connected to everything.” The pact of generosity weaves everything together. The call on our lives to care and nurture includes everything. The stewardship of the real earth, the real waters, and the real land is not some political agenda. It is the work of those who are woven into the generous covenant that God has with everybody and everything.

This is the covenant that starts our journey in Lent. Lent, admittedly, will end with a darker turn. Creation won’t be cared for. Human beings, one in particular will be spurned, will enter the ugly real. We will begin to think at that point that maybe life isn’t all about generosity. But trust me on this. This dark turn will be grace in surprising ways—ways that will cause the entire cosmos to rejoice. But more on that later. For right now, be grasped by the real God whose covenant of grace is for real people and, yes, a real hurting world.