

Genesis 9:8-17 ~ Mark 1:9-15
Again & Again, God Meets Us
 February 21, 2021 ~ 1st Sunday in Lent
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction:

“I’m giving up church for Lent.” That used to be the clever teenage response to the question, “what are you giving up for Lent?” Well, since we all were forced to give up church (as we knew it) and many of the other things we thought we couldn’t live without since midway through Lent of 2020—you could say that Lent is still going—for 48 weeks, WEEKS not days. So this year, we may have the impulse to give up Lent for Lent. Perhaps instead, we can try doing Lent differently. Certainly, our online youth-led Ash Wednesday service gave us a chance to experience the imposition of ashes in a whole new way. One long-time member told me on Thursday, he liked the Ash Wednesday service this year that we had in our homes even better than our traditional in-sanctuary Ash Wednesday services. So, were already off to a new start.

Our church tradition of practicing Lent for forty days (minus Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Easter, plunges us once again deep into our narrative tradition that goes all the way back to *our* ancient, primeval version of the Flood story in Genesis 9 that culminates in God’s unilateral covenant with Noah after 40 days and nights. We are about to hear the story that connects Jesus to God’s making good on this promise. The rainbow in full technicolor. Jesus gets in line at river’s edge with everyone else, and at the same time, lines up the inauguration of his earthly ministry with God’s promise of being for us, staying with us, even to the point of becoming us, in Jesus. I will warn you: this story goes from very wet to very dry, very quickly. You might want to grab a drink of water as you listen.

Sermon:

If the text I just read made you feel like you’re in the movie “Ground Hog Day,” I can understand why. The voice from heaven said the same thing to Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration in last week’s text. And in January I preached not one, but two sermons from parts of today’s gospel reading. So, if it feels like we are going over the same ground here again, you are right. And A+ for your attentiveness in worship! Under the cloud of COVID as we come nearer and nearer to the one-year mark, we may feel like other aspects of our pandemic lives have a “Ground Hog Day” feeling as well. Stuck in this strange life of isolation, masks, social distancing for month after month. Appropriately, I am beginning a Lenten sermon series called, “Again & Again: A Lenten Refrain.”ⁱ

In Lent, as we journey with Jesus on his inexorable path to Jerusalem, we’re reminded that, again and again, suffering and brokenness finds us, in small ways and large. This past week, during the devastating winter storm events causing power outages and grid failures across Texas and beyond, we feel this truth in our guts. And again, we see how the most vulnerable populations suffer the most when disaster, whether a pandemic or a storm strikes. We lament again, we mess up again and again. And so often: in exactly the same way. You’d think we’d learn, and still we get mired in the same old ruts, the same arguments, we fall into the same bad habits. The same populations get hurt the worst.

Sarah Are, Founding Creative Partner of the Sanctified Art Team, who helped create this Lenten series theme, tells her story that she grew up in a family where church was not an option. They went every single week, rain or shine. So as an adolescent she asked, “Why do we have to go to church every siiiingle week?” (cue the dramatic eye roll). Her dad responded, ‘Because we are a forgetful people.’ⁱⁱ I thought that was a great response! We go to church (in one way or another) because we need to hear that truth, the one we heard in today’s text and last week’s, “You are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased,” every single week, again and again, day in and day out, lest we forget.”

We go to church, we practice Lent, because we forget to look for the rainbow. Especially when we are in the midst of a storm. We go to church because we need to hear Jesus’ standing invitation to repent, to change your heart and to go beyond the mind you have: because in Jesus, the Kingdom of God is near. In Jesus, we still can *choose* a better way, a new way. Because of God’s again and again, we don’t have to stay stuck again and again. I believe Jesus is God’s ultimate rainbow, making good on that covenant with Noah. Jesus, who now says, walk with me.

And yet, again & again, the story of Jesus on the cross repeats—every time lives are taken unjustly, every time the powerful choose corruption and violence, every time individuals forget how to love. Even in today’s story, we hear how Jesus’ ministry began with the unjust incarceration of John the Baptist, who will be unjustly executed, as will Jesus. And so we throw up our hands and cry out, “How Long, O God?” And yet, in the midst of the chaos of our lives, God offers this sacred refrain, “I choose you, I love you, I will lead you to repair.” Again and again, God breaks the cycle and offers us a new way forward. From the waters of the receding flood, to the waters of the Jordan River, God is making good on God’s unilateral promise. God’s “never again shall all flesh be cut off” becomes God’s “again & again” from the never-never land of Noah, to the always-always land of the eternal love and grace.

Did you notice how it’s all God in this covenant, “As for me” – then God lays down no conditions or expectations for Noah, not in this first covenant. In so many words, God is saying to all flesh for all creation: it’s on me. I’ve got your back. I’m all in. As 1 John puts it, God is LOVE. Yes, God is relational: organic, dynamic, interactive.

Let’s think about God’s choice of a rainbow as a symbol of this “all in” promise. We know rainbows appear after a storm, when we feel upended and overwhelmed. And second, a rainbow in the sky looks like a hunter bow. So, we have in this symbol, God, the cosmic hunter in the sky, laying down God’s cosmic bow. God Choosing alternative power: the power of the cross, the power of forgiveness, the healing power of grace: the ultimate power of Divine Love. Which kind of power are we going to claim? The Kingdom of Rainbows has come near. The Kingdom of God where one chooses to put down the bow. One chooses to forego the road of violence. To forego the path of might making right. And instead, follow Jesus way of servanthood, self-sacrifice, in the name of cosmic reconnection. One breath, one decision, yes, as they say in AA, one day at a time.

How cosmic? Kaitlin B. Curtice, indigenous author, says it like 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.” Tethered and purposed for relational connection to our relational God of the cosmos.ⁱⁱⁱ

Howard Washington Thurman, African-American author, theologian, educator, civil rights leader, and mystic was born in 1899. Howard was one of the very first leaders in the modern non-violent movement in our country. He was a mentor to Martin Luther King Jr. But his strong conviction that the first order of social change begins with the individual caused his approach to be controversial. He traced his approach back to a very young age, when he felt God’s real and loving presence, whether he was on the water, in the garden, or looking up at the night sky. Here is a story Howard tell from his childhood:

“One night I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I would like to go see Halley’s Comet. I got up, dressed quickly, and went out with her into the back yard. There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety I asked, without taking my eyes off it, “What will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?” There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion, when without knocking I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer. At last she said, “Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us.” In that moment something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic.”^{iv}

I want to leave you with a poem by Howard Thurman. This poem has become very important to me this past year—I first heard it and prayed with it on May 3, 2020 at an online retreat I attended for clergy, as we were all trying to figure out how to “live and lead from the spiritual heart in a time of heightened anxiety,”—the title and focus of this two day retreat. The poem is titled, “How Good It Is to Center Down,” It has fed and nurtured my spirit, ever since. In fact I have renamed my early morning prayer as my “Center Down Time.” As we seek out place, our purpose, our call in the cosmos Jesus came to save, I invite you to journey with it this Lent as well. Here it is:

*How good it is to center down!
To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences,
While something deep within hungers and thirst for the still moment and the resting lull.
With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;
A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.
We look at ourselves in this moment—the kinds of people we are.*

The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives?—what are the motives that order our days?

What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

For what end do we make sacrifices?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all of the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered,

Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down.^v

And to that I will add as my final word: How good it is to center down and reach for the rainbow.

ⁱ SanctifiedArt.org Lenten Series, Again & Again, A Lenten Refrain, Guide by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Kaitlin B. Curtice, *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God*, (Brazos Press, Baker, Grand Rapid, MI, 2020)

^{iv} Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Friends United Press: 1963), pp.86-87, Note: minor edits to incorporate gender-inclusive language].

^v Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, (Beacon Press: Boston, MA, 1953), p.28.