

First Sunday of Lent - March 1, 2009

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In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The word Lent originally meant "springtime": the word comes from the Old English word for "spring," lencten, which came from lengan, "to make longer", which refers to the lengthening of days. Spring time is a time of new growth, a time of awakening. For the next five weeks or so we have the opportunity to awaken and to grow in faith. Healthy growth requires fertile soil, light and water. How is the soil in which our hope in the gospel is planted? Does it have the right PH balance or is it too acidic?

On Ash Wednesday we remembered that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We are the soil from which growth may occur. So let us ask - What kind of soil am I? Am I hard like clay, unwilling to unclench teeth or fist? Have all the hurts that I have suffered, all the disappointments caused my heart to petrify?

Or am I too loose and easily washed away by the floods of cares and concerns, which constantly pour down on my head? Do I deny roots purchase by running from commitment? Can I let other soil (other humans) into my life to enrich my own soil's nutrients?

Through out the history of salvation, God's people have often proved to be very difficult soil. In the story of Noah, we recall that humankind had become hosts for evil weeds, which bore evil deeds. All except Noah and his family were infertile and useless by God and were destroyed. Even though we may paper our children's rooms with the images of the Ark and the animals, this is no child story. Think of what Moses and his family saw floating in the water as they sailed aimlessly for those forty days. The sheer trauma that Noah experienced was probably the reason for his self-medication with alcohol. In just a few lines later in the story Ham finds his father drunk and passed out, reports it to his other brothers Shem and Japheth who cover his nakedness without peaking. When Noah awakes hung-over, he curses Canaan, Ham's son and subsequently all of Ham's future offspring. This curse has since been used to justify years of slavery in the Middle East and even in North America!

So even Noah, who was once fertile soil, became like a dust bowl. It is not uncommon for folks that have experienced significant trauma, and going through the flood counts, to be unready for growth without some interventions and intentional cultivation. While we know that Noah lived for an additional 350 years according to the text, we do not read anything about God's continued interaction with him, but we can rest assured that God did not leave him traumatized and acidic, but carefully enriched and healed his being so that he was again a fertile bed for faith to grow. We can say this because of the knowledge that we have of God's character as seen in the rainbow and later through Jesus, God's son.

The section of the story of Noah that we have today in our Lectionary deals with an aspect of growth that is out of our control, light. Light is the first thing that God spoke into existence and it was good. As the rains came down and flooded the earth, the dark, heavy clouds blocked the sunlight. After the rains stopped, and the happy animal couples disembarked from their cruise, God spoke to Noah and his sons and makes a covenant with them, their descendants and every living creature. This covenant is similar to the covenant that God makes with Abraham, Moses and David. All of these covenants have a sign associated with it. For David it was the Messiah, Jesus, for Moses, the Ten Commandments (and a lot more), for Abraham it was circumcision, and finally for Noah it is the rainbow. Notice this covenant is not a two way, but a one-way street. There are no demands made on the recipients of God's promise. The promise is that God will never flood the earth and destroy the earth again.

There are three things that the rainbow's unique light helps us see. First of all, God makes a significant change in the way that God will relate to creature and creation. While the flood was an example of a God whose intolerance of evil leads to violence and destruction, God's new way will be one of tolerance and care in spite of the existence of that evil. This cannot be easy for our heavenly father. Assume that sin hurts God even more than it hurts us when God watches His children inflict pain on His other children. How hard must that be to watch, how painful! Last week when my youngest son Lars was in the hospital I watched the nurses and doctors hunt for and subsequently rupture eight veins in their unsuccessful attempts at starting an I.V. These were good people who in their efforts to help my son were unintentionally causing him great pain and I was sick to my stomach with a feeling of helplessness for my hurting child. I hope I will never have to watch my child suffer intentionally at the hands of another. And we know how lent ends don't we! We know of God's own son, Jesus' and the suffering and humiliation that he will endure. We know that when all abandoned Jesus on that cross, that God's gaze never drifted from His beloved son. The God of the rainbow, has hung up his battle bow and watches with tears that refract light into a myriad of colors. Have you ever squinted through a tear at the end of a purging cry? Were you able to behold things then in a new light? This is the light of the rainbow.

Secondly, In this tear twisted light we are seen by God in the best possible light as through a pair of heavenly "rainbow colored glasses". And finally we, and all of creation, are recipients of this promise and this light. We need this special kind of light, the light of the rainbow for our faith to grow. It is a light that reminds us that our faith is not independent of others, but intimately connected to all of creation. Since pollutants in the air prevent water droplets from being suspended in the air and refracting light as to produce a rainbow, what does that mean for us as stewards of creation and caretakers of this gift?

So we have talked about the soil, and the light, what about the water?

In the epistle, Peter makes the connection between our baptism and the flood. Just as Noah and his family were saved through the waters, so were we in our baptism. Peter says that baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscious, which means it is God's

power to cultivate a right relationship with God in us. It is a special watering, one that contains some spiritual fertilizer, a true miracle grow if you will excuse the pun.

In 1982, the World Council of Churches issued the ecumenical document Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. In this document there is a paragraph on the “Participation in Christ’s death and resurrection”. It says

Baptism means participating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus went down into the river Jordan and was baptized in solidarity with sinners in order to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). This baptism led Jesus along the way of the Suffering Servant, made manifest in his sufferings, death and resurrection (Mark 10:38–40, 45). By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the “old Adam” is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken. Thus those baptized are no longer slaves to sin, but free. Fully identified with the death of Christ, they are buried with him and are raised here and now to a new life in the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, confident that they will also ultimately be one with him in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6:3–11; Col. 2:13,3:1; Eph. 2:5-6).

Jesus came to the waters of baptism and saw the heavens tear apart and he heard the voice of God affirm his identity. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Notice in Mark’s account it is personal- not “This is my son” as to be for the crowd’s benefit as we heard during the account of the transfiguration, but for Jesus’ benefit. This affirms Jesus’ identity and mission. For each of us as well, when we are baptized we are reminded of our status and identity as God’s beloved child in who God is well pleased through Jesus.

There was an interesting story about a woman who disappeared in New York City over the summer who had a rare identity disorder of the type that the fictional literary and movie character Jason Borne suffered. The following is a direct quote from Today’s New York Times.

“In New York On Aug. 28, a Thursday, a 23-year-old schoolteacher from Hamilton Heights named Hannah Emily Upp went for a jog along Riverside Drive. That jog is the last thing that Ms. Upp says she remembers before the deckhands rescued her from the waters of New York Harbor on the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 16.

Rumors and speculation abounded about what befell Ms. Upp. She disappeared the day before the start of a new school year at Thurgood Marshall Academy, a Harlem school, where she taught Spanish. She left behind her wallet, her cellphone, her ID and a host of troubling questions.

It was as if the city had simply opened wide and swallowed her whole — until she was seen on a security camera at the Midtown Apple store checking her e-mail. Then she

vanished again. And then reappeared, not only at the Apple store but also at a Starbucks and several New York Sports Clubs, where news reports said she went to shower.

Was she suffering from bipolar disorder? Running away from an overly demanding job? Escaping from a city that can overwhelm even the most resilient?

Other questions lingered. Did she forage for food? Where did she sleep? Most baffling of all, how did she survive for so long without money or any identification in one of the world's busiest and most complex cities?

That she was rescued, alive and well, is in itself amazing; most such stories do not have happy endings. But the explanation for what had happened raised even more questions than Ms. Upp's disappearance had — for her more than for anybody.

After her rescue, while she was recovering from hypothermia and dehydration at Richmond University Medical Center in Staten Island, she was told that she was suffering from dissociative fugue, a rare form of amnesia that causes people to forget their identity, suddenly and without warning, and can last from a few hours to years.”

You can read the rest of Mrs. Upps' story in today's paper, but the point that I would like to make is that Baptism is the ultimate statement of identity for us. It is who we are, beloved children of God, sealed by God's Spirit, empowered for ministry. While we certainly are not suffering from dissociative fuge, do we always remember our baptism? Do we let the relationship that God established with us through those life saving waters effect our every decision and action?

Jesus is cast into the wilderness immediately following his baptism and is tempted. We live in the world and are tempted constantly and assailed relentlessly. When Jesus is out there, the angles minister to him, God does not forget or abandon him. God does not forget or abandon us either! We are God's beloved as well. It is our identity! Don't let anyone take that away form you!

Even after Jesus emerges from the wilderness, the temptations do not stop, but with determination and perseverance he engages in the ministry of bringing the Good News to others in his person. I know you are saying that “he is Jesus, we are just people.” But no we are not just anyone. We are God's beloved and we have God's power to call upon. We can count on the angles to come to us in the wilderness! We will not be abandoned even in our death!

The soil that we are is and continues to be penetrated with rays of the rainbow and watered with baptismal waters. The faith we hope to cultivate is being cultivated by Christ the ultimate gardener that Mary meets on that Easter morning outside the tomb.

During this Lent, let us not forget who we are, beloved children of God, fertile for growth in faith, able to withstand temptation and equipped for ministry, to bring the Good News to the world. And above all let us not forget who our God

is, the one who shepherds us out of chaos, promises his love through tears, affirms our identity through sacrificial love and gives us a divine mission and the resources to achieve that mission.

May this spring time for the soul be a time of rich growth for you and me and all of God's beloved.