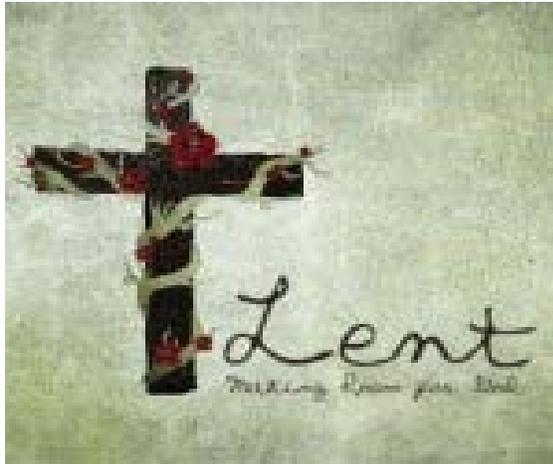


Genesis 9: 8-17; Psalm 25: 1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1: 9-15



Begin Lent in 2015 with this question: “What is God giving up for Lent?”<sup>1</sup>

Maybe we need reminding that it is not – always – all about me. God has a role to play in the life we live. We can choose to ignore God or we can fully embrace God. I suspect most of us are somewhere in between. On days when things are going well, it is very easy to give thanks to God, to remember that God has had a part to play in our lives. On days when things are not going well, we are quick to criticize: Where are you, God, when I need you?; when I don’t understand what is happening; when

life is not fair. And then, too often, we don’t listen for an answer; we are so busy griping and complaining that we seemingly cannot simply sit in silence and listen for what God may be trying to tell us through whatever it is that is not going the way we want it to. God probably gets pretty frustrated when we ask and then we fail to consider how God is present, even at the darkest of times.

What is God giving up – for Lent and for us?

In Genesis, God voluntarily gives up an ability to destroy humankind by flood. Remember what brought us to this point. God created the world and everything in it. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were banished from the garden. Not killed, although that was what God has told them would happen if they ate of the tree of good and evil- no, God refrained from killing them and banished them to be mortal.

Then Cain kills Abel. God, rather than responding in kind, marks Cain as under God’s protection even as Cain is forced to leave his land and his people to wander and ultimately to settle in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Then as humankind prospered and multiplied, humankind became wicked and as the writers of Genesis put it” “and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continuously” (Gen. 6:5). At this point, “the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart” (v.6) and “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and the earth was filled with violence” (v.11). It is only at this point that God decides to destroy humankind except for Noah and his family and the animals via an ark.

Noah and those with him on the ark survive the waters that once again cover the earth. The earth that God had created by separating the waters from the land is once again cast into the chaos of water. A flood by definition is water that is out of control, dangerous and life-threatening. As the waters of the flood recede, Noah and those on the ark are safe on dry land again. The chaos of the waters is over.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to “Sermon Brainwave” podcast found at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org). (Feb. 15, 2015)

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

God establishes with Noah and his sons a covenant that now includes all the birds, the domestic animals and every animal that comes out of the ark. "Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood. God establishes a sign of this covenant with all living creatures in the shape of a bow to be seen in the clouds.

God has given up vengeance and violence to re-establish a covenantal relationship with all living things. The rainbow, though, only appears following rain – a reminder to God that water can bring chaos and destruction even as it can provide necessary moisture for crops to grow and for humans and animals to drink. Water is essential to our existence. Water, used in baptism, is an essential element to our being united with Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.

The Genesis passage uses the word "covenant" to explain what God is giving up for Lent. Covenant is similar to, but not exactly the same, as a contract. A contract is an agreement between two parties and sets out what each agrees to do or refrain from doing in exchange for consideration.

For example, I sign a contract with an auto dealer to buy a car. In exchange for my payment of money, the dealer agrees to sign the title to the car over to me. Consideration in this case on my part is the money I pay. Consideration on the dealer's part is signing over the title to the car to me. If I fail to make my payments, the dealer can repossess the car but unless I fail to make the payments, the dealer no longer has any ownership rights in the car. Both the dealer and I have something the other one wants. We agree to exchange that something to get what we want.

A covenant in the Biblical sense has some similarities and some differences. In the case of the rainbow, God gives up violence against all living things regardless of the fact that humankind has not agreed to give up anything. Humankind, as we see all too frequently on the nightly news, still engages in violence, hatred, malice, envy, spite, greed and all the other sins you can think of. God says, I give up my right to respond to your evil and hatred with violence expressed through a flood. God says, I give up my right to destroy you who have corrupted the wonderful world I created. Nothing is required of humans. God simply chooses to give up annihilating creation because God chooses to give it up.

Further, God sets the bow after the rain as a reminder of this covenant. A thing of beauty to remind God and us that God is present.

God gives up more than the ability to destroy all of creation for Lent. God becomes Jesus, fully human and subject to all the frailties of humankind, including temptation and testing. Jesus has been assured through the descending dove and the voice from heaven that he is God's son. Note the difference from the other gospels. In Matthew and John, the voice says "**this** is my Son" speaking to those gathered. In Mark, the voice says "**You** are my Son" specifically directed at Jesus. The identity of Jesus is confirmed by the voice from heaven. The connection and the relationship between Jesus as human being and God as creator is spoken. Jesus is now identified as belonging to God and affirmed as the one whom God has sent to bring the realm of God closer to earth in the hope that all will respond with love towards God and towards each other.

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

Some scholars point out that it is the Holy Spirit that pushes Jesus into the wilderness following his baptism. It was not Satan, whom Jesus will face during his time in the wilderness, but rather this is like a parent saying “it’s for your own good” or “this hurts me more than it hurts you” (I never believed that line, did you?). Scholars ask us to consider whether we would follow Jesus without this time of testing and temptation. We may more likely trust someone who has had experiences similar to ours when asking for advice or looking for someone to be a mentor to us. Jesus’ response to the temptations affirms in us that Jesus is a model for us of how we are to behave in all circumstances. The time Jesus spends in the wilderness and his response to the temptations help us ask, as the psalmist did, for God to show us God’s ways; to teach us God’s paths; to lead us in God’s truth and to acknowledge that Jesus is our salvation and the one in whom we can trust all the day long.

David Lose, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, says that it is not surprising that God saves us from flood or chaos. What is surprising is our insistence on returning to and living in chaos, violence, anger, bitterness, hatred and other emotions that are detrimental to our well being. God’s nature is to create, to save us, to love us and to forgive us.<sup>2</sup>

Lose continues:

If God, who alone has the right to despair, judge or destroy, surrenders the divine prerogative from covenantal commitment, might not we who have tasted his mercy look upon all persons and all things as inherently worthwhile, that is, as those things that God has called worthy?

God has given up despair, judgment and the ability to destroy to remain in relationship with us. For Lent, I invite you to also give up despair, judgment and an ability to destroy relationships as well. For Lent, focus on reestablishing relationships that have grown stale or sour. Seek forgiveness where it is needed. Give forgiveness where your own anger or bitterness has put a wall between you and another. Learn from God that violence and destruction are not the answer. God offers us what we want most- love and affirmation that we are God’s beloved.

**Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose in Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 27-31.