

St. Paul's Congregational Church
February 18, 2018 – Lent 1B
Genesis 9: 8 – 17; Mark 1: 9 – 15
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It seems like the season of Lent came quickly this year, doesn't it. Thanks to the calendar this year, we have so quickly moved from the Stable to Epiphany to the journey toward the cross and the great celebration of Easter.

But here we are – in a time of preparation, of repentance, of forgiveness, of hopefully a season of taking time to look at our relationship with God – and each other.

Ann Weems gives us a definition of Lent, a roadmap for our observance of this season. She says, “Lent is a time to take the time to let the power of the faith story take hold of us; a time to let the events get up and walk around in us; a time to hover over the thoughts of our hearts, a time to ponder and a time to wonder.....Lent is a time to allow a fresh new taste of God.”

Our scriptures this morning are so fitting for this time, aren't they....the images of the wilderness and the rainbow – so appropriate for the journey we've all been on this week especially.

Ash Wednesday – the time to repent, the time to be on our way to God's way – asking for God's mercy, begging for God's mercy.

The gospel takes us back to the story of the Baptism of Jesus – we meet again John the Baptist – the voice crying out in the wilderness, the messenger, the baptizer. People came from all over – they came to see, they came to confess, to seek repentance – who doesn't want to leave behind the burdens of the past, the failures, the disappointments, the hurts, and start anew? So the people came to find John, they came to the wilderness and to the water, looking to leave the past behind. But he tells them, he's not the One. He baptizes with water; the one to come baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

Yet people came – longing, hoping, expecting, seeking, preparing for the One. And then Jesus of Nazareth appeared. Into the water Jesus came. Dripping wet, he came up from the water, and in the silence, the promised Holy Spirit descended like a dove. Then the voice speaks to him: you are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Then, still wet, still dripping, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. The tempter was waiting.

The tempter knows that things happen in the wilderness – the wilderness is the mirror – the temptation is to look away. But Jesus looks. The days turn to night. Night turns to day. Longing, hoping, praying – 40 days – and then, the flutter of wings. The wilderness behind, the work ahead.

If we are honest with ourselves, we do our best to avoid the wilderness, don't we. Things happen in the wilderness we'd rather not face. The wilderness is where we feel lost, where we wander around, a place where we are forced to see things we don't want to see, where we go to places we'd rather not go. It's a place where, like Jesus, we wait to encounter the holy.

We don't like being in the wilderness, but it's a place where we as individuals and community must go because out of the emptiness comes new life. The image that comes to me is that of the beautiful pearl – a piece of sand stuck inside that oyster that must be so uncomfortable, even painful – but what a thing of beauty comes out of that distress.

During this Lenten season we are tempted to simply go through the motions, to skirt the wilderness, to turn away from encountering the wild places in our lives and in our world. That's so human, isn't it. But if we are to follow Jesus, if we are to be renewed for new possibilities, we must face the wild places. From the call of Abraham and Sarah to the wandering of the people of Israel for forty years, the wilderness has become a place of refining and self-discovery.

But our forbearers never faced the desert alone. For forty years God journeyed with Israel. For forty days God watched over Noah. For forty days, God stood with Jesus. And for our time, God will stand with us. That's the promise. That's the hope.

The wilderness has never been so vivid to me as it has been this week: on Ash Wednesday we watched in horror as the news reported the story, gave us images from the air and those images captured on cellphone video taken by students of yet another school shooting in Florida. 17 lives lost at the hand of a 19 year old young man. Unspeakable violence, unspeakable sadness, tragedy – we couldn't help but ask, how long, God. How long?

And more chaos in our government – from politicians responses to the school shooting, from reports of Russian attacks on our democracy, to dismantling of protections for the disabled in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Then there was the most intense and troubling session I've ever had with the women of Integrity House on Thursday when we feared that one young woman was going to run away in the midst of our group meeting.

Then came the news on Friday morning that the Nutley schools were closed because of a threat to the security of the schools, to the students. Our own Lori, our church secretary, and her daughter were interviewed by CBS news. It was stunning, wasn't it. Much too close to home – we couldn't avoid that fear, that anxiety.

In the midst of all this, I must confess: I felt the wilderness enfolding me – it was suffocating. It was almost unbearable.

But, you know, if we are honest with ourselves, maybe we know that we need the wilderness to stop, to clear away the chaos, to take some time to regroup. The temptation to avoid all this is overwhelming, isn't it – but Jesus calls us to follow him through this process.

And this isn't just an individual process – our community, our world – yes, our church too – maybe now more than ever we need to spend some time in the wilderness – our faith tells us that we're never alone and hopefully gives us the courage and strength to enter in. We need to spend the time looking at ourselves as individuals and church in order to find new life, new ministry, and new ways of being the people of God. We long for the way things were in the past, but God is calling us to a new future. And we cannot get to God's future if we are not able to let go of the past.

God has work for us to do and that work begins, like it did with Jesus when we are driven to the wild places of discovery.

We go to the wilderness to discover anew the joy of being beloved as God's children. We go to learn once more what it means to be and live as beloved.

We go to listen for the voice of God calling us again.

We go to see Christ more clearly in the world around us.

We go to the wilderness because we can no longer be as we have always been.

We go because that is where we encounter God.

We go because we know God walks with us, even, maybe even especially, in the wilderness. And we know God loves us. We are people of the covenant – people bound together in God's love with each other and with God. Nothing can change that, nothing will change that.

Today we also remember the story of Noah – of a time when God gives a fresh start for all humanity.

And after this week, don't we all yearn for just that. Here's the good news: that opportunity, that hope, is in front of us every day.

We, along with Noah and his descendants, are beneficiaries of that very first covenant between God and humanity, known as the rainbow covenant. Noah's story reminds us that it's not all about us, but about God. Noah's story is about what God is doing and has done not only here and now, but in times long ago and into a future we cannot even dimly see. This story is about God never giving up on us. And in the chaos, the pain, of these days, that's awfully good news.

The people of ancient Israel needed to hear this gracious promise during their time of exile – with all the structures and practices of their shared life wrecked, with their reality in shambles, they were undoubtedly inspired by the story of a new beginning, a story of hope and the promise of God's presence with them, always.

And we need to hear this, to remember, to be inspired by this story too. With the events in our world today, the sufferings of friends and families, with all the uncertainty of violence, of war looming – we are called to remember God's gracious promise - of that everlasting covenant bond – the rainbow appears through the wilderness around us. This beautiful moment of reconciliation and peace is a blessing to us as well.

How does this passage speak to us about our relationship with God today? How does this promise of the rainbow help us get through these most difficult days? What does it mean to us as church as we continue our journey into the future?

The rainbow, Nicole Johnson writes, symbolizes not only peace but hope as well. And that is the way the community of faith is called to live: in hope.

She writes, "Hope, the expectation that things will get better, not only gets us through the difficult times but also gives us strength to work proactively in the interest of a just and peaceful world. Hope helps communities to rebuild after a deathly and devastating natural disaster.....Hope encourages the faith community to seek justice for all now, while waiting expectantly for the reign of Christ that will usher in pure justice. In a world that sometimes seems so lacking in hope, the Christian community is called to live that hope for others."

Hope empowers action.

There has been much conversation this week about the value of offering thoughts and prayers to the victims of the shooting in Florida. And I believe that's a good thing – of course we lift the sufferings of our brothers and sisters to God. Our prayers are a message of hope indeed. But, we're also called to action, aren't we. We are called to live out that hope by our

actions. To speak out against injustice, to care for our neighbors, to be instruments of peace and healing, to be the light that shines in the darkness.

What is the message of hope that we not only preach, but also that we live out, within our church community and to the world beyond our walls? How do we spread, live out, the message of hope that we've received from our loving God – how do we overcome our “stuckness” that gets in the way of sharing the good news that we've received? That's our task for Lent this year I think – to re-affirm our covenant with God and each other and bring it alive in a new way. Maybe we become “walking rainbows.”

Another poem by Ann Weems both challenges and encourages us:

A rainbow is not just a symphony of colors sent to calm the storm in our souls;

It is a talk with God, a mysterious, miraculous conversation with God,
Heart to heart, the very heart of God saying to our hearts:

“I remember I am your God.

Be my walking rainbows,

So that the whole world will know to whom you belong,

For I am the God who keeps promises,

And I have not forgotten our covenant.”

This is the hope of the church: that God keeps promises.

The mission of the church is to walk among the suffering and give, for we are covenant keepers, walking rainbows,

Bringing the hope of the good news to the poor.

We live in a world of the wilderness and the rainbow. Let's move together through this season of Lent – a time to ponder and a time to wonder – let's together experience a fresh new taste of God and let's bring the hope of the good news to each other and our neighbors near and far. Amen.