1st Sunday of Lent (Year B)

'A Rainbow for Lent'

An interesting combination of readings today! The Gospel is Mark's version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness; the traditional pattern for the 40 days of Lent, a simple account with nothing about the temptations, changing stones to bread and so on, as in Matthew and Luke. Just Jesus driven into the wilderness, tempted by Satan for 40 days, out there with the wild beasts, with angels waiting on him – it has a kind of attraction. It leaves room for the imagination.

I have been in such wilderness places, both the desert and jungle, learning how to survive but I am no lover of TV shows on the subject. But I also love the idea of wilderness as a metaphor, how we all have wilderness experiences in our lives, times of barrenness and testing.

We also have the Genesis story of God's covenant with Noah after the flood and the sign of that covenant, the rainbow. Rainbows in nature have the power to fascinate and delight. We know that there is a rational explanation for rainbows according to the laws of physics that anybody can probably explain. Here in a story of the heritage of the faith community rainbows are a part of our sacred story.

Here is a problem. A rainbow for Lent, a season traditionally stark and austere? We don't even have flowers in the church during Lent. Lent is dark and sombre, a cloth-draped cross, ashes for Ash Wednesday, and we get reminders of sinfulness, mortality and a need to repent. Yet, there it is in the first reading on the first Sunday in Lent. We have bright colours in a symbol of hope and promise. This might not be bad for Lent.

First of all, it reminds us that our spirituality cannot be disembodied and disconnected. It cannot be the kind that is so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good. God's covenant with Noah was centred on the earth. It was a covenant that God made that never again would God destroy the earth with a flood. And it was made not only with humans, but with the animals and, in fact, with the earth itself. "…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…." God making covenant with all creatures; a solemn promise that never again would God send such thorough destruction upon the earth.

Whatever the liturgical seasons may mean to us, and whatever our Christian faith may mean to us, we must be rooted in the world in which we live. Christianity must be concerned with others, with people, with other living creatures and with the earth in which

we live. The covenant with Noah speaks to the concern we should have for our world and for all of its creatures. We are stewards of the earth.

But what does it have to do with repentance, a very Lenten theme? God does a turn around, which is what the word repentance means. Living in one direction, and you turn around and you go the other direction.

God did just that, saying to Noah: "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." Is He saying: "I overreacted?" Most of us should relate to that. Someone does something or says something to offend us and we let them have it. Boom! We go for it. Later we think, maybe I overdid it. Maybe I shouldn't have said what I said. We can all understand that kind of repentance, I think.

The rainbow was put in the sky not only to remind people of the covenant, but to remind God, who says that when he sees the rainbow, "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." That is another thing. Finally, the rainbow is a good symbol for Lent to remind us that there is no point in being down in the mouth. Lent should not be morbid.

Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount about looking dismal: "whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face…." Wash your face, put a little make up on, comb your hair, look good.

In this time of COVID, economic downturn, people losing jobs by the hundreds of thousands…maybe the rainbow as a symbol isn't such a bad idea. It is a hopeful symbol.

In other ancient cultures the rainbow represented a bow, a weapon, used by the gods. In Hebrew the word for the war bow and the rainbow is the same word. But the Hebrews had another interpretation of the rainbow; it was a weapon that had been disarmed. It was pointed harmlessly upward. And it was connected with the story of the flood and God's promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood. The rainbow, for them, was a sign of hope and promise, a symbol of peace.

Biblical scholars tell us that the flood narrative comes from about the 6th century BC, which puts it in the time of the exile. For people living in exile, taken from all that was dear to them, forced to live in the land of another people and to work for them in servitude, the story of the flood and of God's promise that followed in the rainbow, must have provided some hope.

We should understand how a negative symbol can become positive. At the end of Lent we come to the symbol of our faith, the cross, a cruel instrument designed for the infliction of pain, not made for causing death in a swift and humane way, but for prolonging death. Yet

it has become the sign and symbol of the Christian faith, one that speaks to us new life, of forgiveness, of a new creation. We stand in that faith tradition with our spiritual ancestors who at the end of the worst devastation they could imagine, found hope in the sign of the rainbow and in the promise of God.

So, I offer you the symbol of the rainbow for this season of Lent – colourful, bright, a sign of hope and promise, a reminder that sometimes we may go too far in our desire for getting back at someone, and may need to turn around and repent; and a symbol that connects our spirituality and roots it firmly in the world in which we live, a world full of people and other creatures that we have a stake in.

Interestingly, we know that we can never reach the end of the rainbow, but we can know that on the horizon of faith is hope. A symbol for Lent to see us through the wilderness, those times of barrenness and testing!

Rev Brian Griffiths
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