

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Look for the Rainbow”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Lent 1—February 18, 2018

Lessons: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

John Coburn, who was the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts, wrote: “Lent is a time to begin again. It is the best time to begin again. It is the time that is now. It may be the only time we have. Of course, any time is a good time. We cannot pick and choose the time. But Lent presents itself ‘in our face.’

“Lent gives us time to look again at Jesus as he was ‘led by the Spirit for 40 days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil.’ It was the time when he had to sort things out for himself, to wrestle with the options before him, to decide what road he was to travel, who were to be his companions, and what he could count on.

“Lent gives us time to pause and take stock: am I becoming the kind of person I want to become? Or am I letting things slide, giving way to the comfortable, the easiest way, the popular way? Do I stand for something I can be proud of? Lent is a good time to stand up and be counted. What can we be counted for? What can we do to help our church stand for something? When we ‘go along to get along,’ we find ourselves on a slippery slope that is hard to get off.

“Lent is, finally, a time for hope. Life doesn’t have to be a time of discouragement, when we give up trying to make something of ourselves. The Christian life is, in part, a decision to keep looking at the One who went through all we have to go through, who was buffeted even more than we are, who died and rose again.

“This is the Christ whom we are to ‘put on.’ Lent is a good time to do it. Again.”¹

Today our lessons speak of the wilderness and the temptations we encounter in the wilderness and they speak of hope. We remember Jesus who was not simply led but was driven into the wilderness. There he was tempted by Satan, by all that is evil, and there he was surrounded by the wild beasts. Those beasts seem less out to get him; they seem less of a threat and more of a protecting presence as if they remember their original intent in the garden, even offering protection to Jesus in the wilderness. Imagine the lions surrounding you not to devour you but rather to provide protection against any who would do you harm. In the wilderness, amidst temptation the wild beasts surround him and the angels wait upon him, the angels take care of him. Temptation and Hope. The people in the time of Noah succumbed to temptation leading God to destroy the earth and then the creation is started all over again, this time with a promise from God that never again will God destroy all living things. Again: temptation and hope. As a reminder of this new covenant, God creates rainbows.

Martin Copenhaver imagines God proclaiming to Noah and his family: “I am establishing my covenant with you. That is, I am committing myself to you. I am going to stick with you no matter what. And as I am my witness, I am never going to send a flood like this again. In fact, I am going to give myself a reminder of this promise. I am going to hang up my bow in the sky [the word in Hebrew refers to the kind of bow that shoots arrows],

¹ John B. Coburn, The Significance of Lent, in The Living Pulpit, Volume 9, Number 1, January – March 2000 © 2000.

but this bow will be empty of arrows. I will never use it again to visit terror upon you. I am more sick of violence than anyone, so I will be the first to lay down my arms.”²

We’ve begun this season of Lent driven in the wilderness again. It is a wilderness that we know altogether too well. Some know a wilderness of loneliness and hurt. Some know a wilderness of sickness or injustice or grief. As a nation we know a wilderness of mourning again the death of school children and teachers, killed at the hands of someone with a semi automatic weapon. Here in this wilderness, where is hope to be found? Can we the followers of Jesus Christ show the world another way? Might we the followers of Jesus Christ, repent of our own idolatry of guns, following God’s lead by hanging up our own weapons? In this wilderness where our hearts are broken and the clouds are deep and ominous, is there a rainbow for us to see?

I read an article this week that gave me some hope, that showed me a kind of rainbow. Paul Nuechterlein writes about how the work of René Girard helped him to understand how God is recreating us, moving us from an idolatrous dependence on sacred violence to a healing communion that unites us in compassion. He offers the work of Jewish philosopher Günter Anders and his retelling of the Noah story into a different sort of parable. Anders pictures Noah as making a prophetic, public show of mourning in advance of the flood.

“Soon a small crowd of curious people had gathered around him. They asked him questions. They asked if someone had died, and who the dead person was. Noah replied to them that many had died, and then, to the great amusement of his listeners, said that they themselves were the dead of whom he spoke. When he was asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he replied to them: “Tomorrow.” Profiting from their attention and confusion, Noah drew himself up to his full height and said these words: ‘The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been. And when the flood will have been, *everything that is will never have existed*. When the flood will have carried off everything that is, everything that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will no longer be anyone alive. And so there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who mourn them. *If I have come before you, it is in order to reverse time*, to mourn tomorrow’s dead today. The day after tomorrow it will be too late.’ With this he went back whence he had come, took off the sackcloth [that he wore], cleaned his face of the ashes that covered it, and went to his workshop. That evening a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: ‘Let me help you build the ark, *so that it may become false*.’ Later a roofer joined them, saying: ‘It is raining over the mountains, let me help you, so that it may become false.’

“Our journey through Lent to Holy Week,” Nuechterlein concludes, “calls us to work on the ark of God’s salvation in Christ, the work of love and forgiveness, so that our way of violence may become false.” Could that be our rainbow today?

How might we reverse time and make a future of continued violence false? How might we join in building a new ark in the world today? How might we hang up our weapons and get others to join us? Yes this is a time of wilderness and it is particularly painful, yet aren’t the most beautiful rainbows those with the darkest and most ominous clouds behind them? They provide a sign of hope in the midst of the storm. And they provide a kind of metaphor for our own lives. In times like these we are meant to find rainbows for each other. Ann Weems, a gifted Presbyterian poet writes:

² Martin B. Copenhaver, Starting Over in The Christian Century, February 21, 2006 © 2006.

*If I could, I'd write for you a rainbow
 And splash it with all the colors of God
 And hang it in the window of your being
 So that each new God's morning
 Your eyes would open first
 to Hope and Promise*

*If I could, I'd wipe away your tears
 And hold you close forever in shalom.
 But God never promised
 I could write a rainbow,
 Never promised I could suffer for you,
 Only promised that I could love you.
 That I do.³*

Lent is a time of wilderness and hope. In this time of pain, look for God's rainbow and be about the work of sharing the power of God's love.

Let us pray: Loving God, our hearts hurt again. We know too well how to blame someone else. We know how to shrug our shoulders and offer prayers but no action. In this wilderness, help us to repent of all that keeps us from being the people you call us to be and give us new strength to become rainbows for each other that our ways of violence may become false. This we pray in the name of Jesus who is with us in the wilderness. Amen.

³ Ann Weems, *I'd Write for You a Rainbow*, in *Reaching for Rainbows*. © 1980 The Westminster Press.