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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/26/2012, The First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Genesis 9. As I read it aloud, notice the Lord's repetition of the phrase "I establish my covenant with you."

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹"Behold, *I establish my covenant with you* and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹*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." (Genesis 9:8-11, RSV)

This divine eloquence leads Martin Luther to this interesting observation:

The Holy Spirit is prolix, but not without purpose. (LW 2, pg. 143)

"Prolix" means "wordy, prolonged, drawn out." So, it means that the Holy Spirit is long-winded in this passage, but for a purpose. Then Luther gives a tender reason why. He compares Noah and his family to children who have been scolded by their mother:

Noah and his people were in great need of such comfort. A man who has been humbled by God is unable to forget his hurt and pain, for affliction makes a far deeper impression than an act of kindness. We observe the same reaction in children. Even though a caressing mother tries to calm them with rattles and other allurements after they have been chastened with the rod, the grief still persists in their heart to such a degree that they have to sigh frequently and sob bitterly. How much more difficult it is for a conscience that has experienced God's wrath and the terrors of death to let comfort come in! (LW 2, page 145)

Had Noah and his people witnessed the chastisement of the Lord? Indeed they had! You and I and our generation might have lived through catastrophes and commotions and terrors, but we have seen nothing like Noah and his folk saw.

The great heading for the story of Noah appears three chapters earlier. In Genesis Chapter 6 we read that the mighty heart of God has become about exhausted with us. Our human race has been a bitter disappointment. Human

deeds and human inclinations were sinful. It was as if the Lord concluded that we human beings are bad -- bad to the bone:

⁵And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. ⁷And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. (Genesis 6:5-7, KJV)

What a decline and heartbreak this is compared to the original judgment of the Lord at the end of his six days of creation:

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31, KJV)

Now things do not look so good. Now things look worthy of destruction.

And the Lord destroys! He destroys vast stretches of his creation. Even the poor animals suffer amidst this divine judgment. How long did the rains fall?

¹²And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights...

¹⁹And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered. (Genesis 7:12, 19, KJV)

That would be traumatic enough, to witness drenching, flooding rain for forty days and forty nights. Appalling sight that must have been for Noah and his kin to stand on the deck of the ark and to witness this divine assault upon life. Noah might have been safe and sound on that ark, but his heart must also have been shaken.

A YEAR OF WRATH!

But there was more to the flood than the forty days of rain. Also, there was that long stretch of time when the flood covered the earth, before it subsided.

At the end of a hundred and fifty days the waters had abated; ⁴and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest upon the mountains of Ararat. ⁵And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen. (Genesis 8:3-5, RSV)

Mt. Kilimanjaro, rising up from the African plain, stretches up 19,340 feet. I know that detail because my wife, Carol, means to climb that mighty mountain this summer. But even the snow-capped top of Mt. Kilimanjaro would be just barely seen after ten months.

And then it is another two months before the waters subside enough for Noah and his family to return to the dry earth, which is forever our natural home. Tossed about on the water or aloft like birds thanks to planes and gliders, we are always a bit out of our element. We humans like eventually to set our feet on solid ground again. But it was a year before Noah was able to do that.

My wife, Carol, recalls the summertime tornadoes of her childhood in Michigan:

...when I was a child of about eleven or twelve living in the southeastern corner of Michigan where in late summertime tornadoes would sometimes occur. I vividly remember the overwhelming feeling of impending violence about to break forth. The sky would have an unnatural dark greenish-gray cast; the strangely light but moist wind would feel as though it was winding itself up for a ferocious strike. And we children would run about outside, simultaneously excited and scared; our eyes peeled on the horizon, our ears alert for the call to come inside to huddle in basements and crawlspaces for safety. It was like the world was slipping back in to that primordial chaos – in the beginning.

It must have been like that when Noah was building the Ark; when the sky grew dark and heavy with clouds; and when the rains began. It must have felt like that when Noah and his family gathered the animals and herded them into the ark and sealed the doors. In those days the earth did slip back into that wasteland, that watery chaos in which everything that God had created was destroyed – all that is except those few people and animals safely ensconced in the ark.

Now, in this morning's Bible reading, the rains have passed, the water has receded, Noah and his family are on dry land, but they have been eye-witnesses to the divine wrath against sin. So, Luther says that the Lord uses many words to comfort and strengthen Noah:

This comfort is expressed in many eloquent words and emphasized in various ways, to meet the need of these wretched people who had been watching the immeasurable wrath of God rage for an entire year. Therefore they could not be talked out of their fear and terror by a word or two; a great abundance of words was needed to drive back their tears and to soften their grief. (LW 2, page 145)

In the Book of Lamentations, we read a wonderful passage that speaks both of the wrath of God and of his even more fundamental compassion:

³¹For the Lord will not cast off for ever: ³²But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. ³³For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. (Lamentations 3:31-33, KJV)

The story of Noah is the story of both the wrath of the Lord and his yet more essential mercy. These two: divine wrath and divine mercy. I think we do well to try to reckon with both of them, at least a word or two.

WRATH OF GOD

First, about the wrath of God: We should probably not be nonchalant about sin, for I do not think the Lord is. Our God has *passion* when it comes to sin. The sin you and I do day by day, in our weary, continual way: I don't think the Lord ever becomes used to it. He never gets over it, never gives up and becomes reconciled to it. It seems that he *cannot* make peace with our sin. It is the *other* side of his massive love for us. His love just cannot rest content with the misery sin brings to us and to our neighbors. No! Never going to make peace with sin!

I think it is no passing detail, then, that when Jesus is dying on the cross, there is darkness in the land from noon to 3 p.m. When the world is supposed to be light, things are reversed and plunged into darkness. It is like one last glimpse into the fury of God against sin -- the kind of sin that conspires to crucify his only beloved Son.

MERCY OF GOD

Now, whenever God the Father looks at you and me -- too much caught up with sin as we are -- he sees Jesus and is reminded of his compassion for us. Jesus, then, is like the rainbow in the sky for us: he is the eternal reminder to the Triune God to discipline his wrath against sin into our salvation from sin, death, and the devil.

And the thing is, I think *you* share the Lord's passion against sin. I think I share it too. The good Lord has so constructed our hearts that we grieve over and oppose sin, even, sometimes, as we *do* it. Because, you see, something precious has been entrusted to us: a *pattern* has been entrusted to us. We know better. I mean the pattern of Jesus and of his life.

A critical moment in the story of God's fundamental compassion for humanity is the baptism of Jesus, which we read about in today's Gospel Lesson. The descent of Jesus into the waters of the Jordan River is like Jesus plunging into the raging sea to save you, to save me. When we were "sinking deep in sin, far from the verdant shore," Jesus plunged in to save us. It is his way. He plunges into the battlefield against Goliath, into the fiery furnace, into the lions' den, into the dark

prison where Paul and Silas sing their hymns (Acts 16). Altogether, he plunges into the holy incarnation, all the way to Golgotha's cross.

We are Christians. Our proper path is to follow Jesus in this plunge to save others. That is what Baptism means for us, to save others and ourselves from the misery of sin. Our pattern is his. And we know in our frail, fitful human way... we know the same thing our Maker knows: that sin is wrong. It is outrageous. It is worth getting riled up about. And it is worth combating for the rest of the days entrusted to us, following the pattern of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.