

“FROM DEATH TO LIFE: From Punishment to Promise”

Lent I

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What are you afraid of? That’s a scary start to a sermon, to be sure. We each have fears, and whether they are deemed rational or irrational, they are real to the one who has them. I fear something harmful happening to my children, spouse, family – some of you have found yourself in the midst of that fear realized. I have fears, but I do not live in fear all the time – though some do, whose lives are full of fear in this world. There are certain fears that help and protect us, but we know the kinds of fear that should not have to be – that mark the brokenness of this world. And what about God – what are you afraid of about with God? Is that easy for you to answer, or does that seem like a strange question to you? Do you have fears about God? I suppose such a question, and answer, requires some faith – because if you don’t believe in God, then you wouldn’t have any fears, and the question doesn’t apply. But when you do believe in God, is fear a part of it? I won’t speak for me, or you, in particular, but I do know there is a long history of people who believe in God being afraid of God – and the most basic, enduring fear, I think, is about punishment: God will get you, punish you, damn you – God will do that if you are bad, and maybe too if you’re just not good enough. Maybe that’s not your fear, but there is a long tradition of such fear about God – fear of punishment – and we are inheritors of that tradition; I sure see and hear about such fear about God all around me, past and present. Is God a God to be feared?

What are you sure of? And I mean that in a positive sense – not in the sense of you can only be sure of death and taxes! Or sure what you’re afraid of! I mean what in life do you most fundamentally trust, value, rely on, believe in? Is it a person, a love, a commitment?...either given to you or that you have for another. Is it yourself – a belief in who you are, how you will live? What are you sure of? I think it is a compelling question to ask of yourself. And, yes, let’s ask that about God too – what do you trust about God, what are you sure of? Is that something you can answer, or is that difficult in its own way? This too, requires some faith in God, but for those who do believe in God, what is it that you trust, believe in, depend on? That seems harder for me

to give a majority answer to – I’m pretty sure about people fearing punishment, but not as sure what people would name about relying on God. But I would think it has to do with being a child of God, created by and loved by God – that God’s love and presence are sure. THAT you can count on.

And so then, one of the ongoing questions of life, of faith, is putting those questions, or those answers, together – how do we put together a fear of God’s punishment with a trust in God’s love? Can they go together? Is it an either/or – a both/and – or are there some different questions and answers altogether that we might be missing?

Well, I don’t know if they do go together, but in the flood story they certainly are placed together, juxtaposed. You want some punishment to be afraid of? Well here is some epic punishment: the flooding of the whole world – the wiping out of humanity and despoiling of creation. God sees the sinful corruption of the world and destroys it. Except for a boat – an ark floating – a remnant of people and creatures salvaged and saved. You could say there is love and presence from God in this, and that is so – but do they go together, does it match the punishment or only pale in comparison? But then you get to the big promise – the promise when it is all over – the promise called a covenant; and it is a covenant that does seem to match the scale of the punishment: it is a promise with every living creature; it is a promise that God will not destroy; it is a promise that God makes without condition; it is a promise God renews with each rainbow – you can rely on this. So now do they go together? The epic scale of the promise matching, or even superceding, the epic scale of the punishment? How can this punishment and promise go together?

Have you been reading the Lenten devotional booklet? Get a copy today, or go online – and you’ll see Kyle Vohlken’s reflection on this story – she says about this Genesis story that ‘time collapses and suddenly we are the story.’ And that resonated with me as just right – the flood and covenant are not just a story about way back when – they are a story about now. This is a world in which the consequences of acting against God’s will are disastrous – to depart from

God's ways is to set the world on the path to destruction. Look around this world – do you see the consequences of human sin? Do you see the deluge of violence and suffering? That is the world then and now. And this is the story too: it is a world to which God is inexorably, inextricably, eternally committed, and in which God is fully, intimately, present. Look around this world – do you see the remarkable gifts of this world, in creation, within people that God creates? Do you see the promise of God made visible in the ways of faithfulness? Judgment and promise are the story today, too.

But there is more to the story – more than the judgment of human waywardness and the promise of human capacity. Here's a little test – did you notice a similarity between last week's gospel lesson and this week's? The transfiguration story last week (later in Mark) and the baptism story from Mark today? Well, in each story we hear the voice of God saying to or about Jesus – “my Son, my beloved” – at the beginning of Jesus ministry, and again when he will journey to the cross, there is this expression of deep love and identity about who Jesus is. And the beauty of it is that as it expresses the depth of love within God, it also expresses the depth of God's love for the world – there is nothing theoretical about this God who is inexorably, inextricably, fully, intimately, present: this is God with us. And the news of this presence is this: the kingdom of God is here. But...still...you could ask here for what, a kingdom for what? To punish, or not?

Hmm – well – in-between the “Beloved” designation of Jesus and the kingdom proclamation from Jesus, we're told Jesus is tempted. And it seems to me that one of the great temptations, distractions – or we could say sins – of the church and people of faith is worrying about and fearing the punishment of God. Aren't there enough real things to fear and be concerned about in this world? Aren't there enough people dealing with brokenness and in need to focus on? Isn't the judgment of God always about bringing the fullness of life to this world? The faith that is needed in this world and this life is not faith to fear God, but faith enough to trust in God – to trust that God is with us; to trust that God's ways are the ways of life; to trust that the

story of Jesus that will take us from Lent through Easter is the story of a God who answers every fear with life.

Here's what I'm afraid of: teaching people to be afraid of God, while the world wallows in brokenness; fearing God's punishment while my neighbors fear for their lives; fear keeping me from hearing the power and life of God's judgment; I'm afraid of missing who God truly is and what God really wants. And here is what I am sure of – that God's promise and presence is the life and hope of this world, and that promise lives in us in the Spirit of Christ. Can we imagine a world that trusts God's ways, that trusts in life over death – imagine the goodness of that? And I am sure of this too: that God can, will, is using us as followers of Jesus Christ to show and fulfill God's promises to this world – and that is the good news our lives and world need to hear.

AMEN.