

**THE BODY OF CHRIST: GOD PLACES A BET; GENESIS 9:8-17, MARK 1:9-14;
LENT ONE/2-22-15; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH**

I begin, connecting the dots between today's lessons to recall the plot of our story as God's people. Genesis opens today *after* the Katrina of all Katrinas; *after* the flood covered the last rooftops in the 9th ward of humanity, *after* livestock and crops are swept away; after fathoms of deep, shifting, storm water covered everything.

Now, sunshine is breaking through the clouds. Animals have left the ark to explore the soggy earth; Noah and family, arms uplifted in awe, praise God.

A great bow, a band of bright colors, stretches over the misty sky. And God speaks to Noah and his family promising never again to destroy any of the living flesh Noah saved from the deluge; never again to destroy human flesh; never again to destroy creation.

The bow is not a candy colored Hallmark special it is a warrior's bow, hung on its side minus the quiver of deadly arrows; it is an outsized weapon big enough for an angry God to destroy whole species and planets.

Scholars are intrigued that what we call the rainbow is not so much for us as it is for God, a sign, a reminder of the promise God makes to Noah and his family. God realizes he needs reminding. He does not suffer human foolishness lightly. He anticipates he will grow angry again at human folly and corruption; He will need to be reminded not to obliterate creation once more.

It is on the ground of God's promise 'never again to destroy' that we are called out of the arks, the bunkers, the bomb shelters in which we hunker down; and are given a second chance to become fully human.

This has been God's aim and purpose from the beginning. God blesses His people to be a blessing to all people; but they turn and divide themselves into the powerful and powerless. So God sends prophets to call them back to their covenant, back to the life-giving law He gave their leader Moses; but they reject the prophets; so God sends conquering armies that carry the people away from the land he gave them.

Finally, when they return, they rebuild their temple, re-institute the law and reorder society. But once again they lose their way; the rituals of righteous living become the uneven scales with which the rich take from the poor.

It is here that Mark begins his story: a man enters a river to be baptized. As he is lifted up from the water as Noah and his family were lifted up in the ark, water pours from his body; droplets scatter from his head and beard; and the voice that blessed Noah blesses the man.

A deep urge drives the man into the surrounding wilderness. He removes himself from the distractions of society to confront and find himself, to discern his future.

He stays in the wilderness forty days among wild animals and finds strength enough to survive the heat of the day, the cold of the night and the loneliness.

Word reaches the man that the authorities have arrested the baptizer. So the man goes north, to Galilee and begins telling the people, "The Kingdom of God is near, repent, believe in the good news."

Although it is many books the Bible is one book, one story about a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. Creation, especially humans are the prize in this showdown between the Creator and Darkness. Including the New Testament, the Bible is our story, the story of God's people known as the Christian church.

When humans keep failing to live up to our end of the deal God is always ready to bet on us, his creation, raising the stakes against the powers of death and darkness. When we fail to observe the legal code, he sends kings and prophets who implore us to turn from our self-serving, self-defeating ways.

Each time we drop our end of the bargain God keeps pushing more chips into the center of the table; as little as we give him to bet on He never fails to raise the stakes to win us, to call us His own. At last, the forces of darkness seem to call the Creator's bluff to see if He is willing to risk what is most precious and dear—His son—to make us His own.

I want to talk in these weeks of Lent about the institution, the church, that claims what I have just outlined as its story.

The biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation is not just another book in the long catalogue of the world's literature, it is also known as 'the church's book' because it is a living document, literally an operator's manual, if you will, for our life together in community and service.

We would not know how to be the church without these ancient stories because our call to live as God's people is counter to the call of the world.

We will discover in the weeks ahead what this book tells us about who we are. We will attempt to apply its wisdom and information to our daily life. We will test its truth against our experience in the world.

We will learn, especially in Lent and especially in Holy Week of Lent about this last final bet God places on us, His hope and His trust that we will turn toward Him and choose life over the powerful allure of darkness and death.

We will watch as God chooses to place His own son into the bidding at the risk of losing him for the sake of winning us. And we will discover how we, all of us in this sprawling, part-time organized, often dis-organized community called the church, have become the living presence in the world of the man who was given for us.

That is what God was facing into the dark glare of oblivion to defeat – the wager by evil that He would ultimately fail to communicate to us, His creation, that we would one day discover the joy of the life He created us to have.

It was finally by His becoming one of us that we would learn to become the people God longed for us to become; that we would experience the paradoxes of faith that strength is in weakness, wealth in poverty, wisdom in foolishness, life in death, and the power of these truths to counter the world's logic.

As we embrace the truth of Jesus' way, as we enact, as he enacted, the principle that to give ourselves away is to gain ourselves, we become more like him – his hands, his feet, his body in the world.

Anything less than that is not worth our attention or calling ourselves a church; nor does it do justice to God's vision for our life together. I want to focus in these Lenten sermons on what and who we are called to be and so in your bulletin today you have a rose colored insert; it has a picture of the sculpture, over here, by the lectern.

The sculpture in this picture is what it will look like at Easter. Right now it is an empty mass of chicken wire in the shape of Christ's body on the cross.

What we are asking you to do to observe a holy Lent, in the words of our Ash Wednesday liturgy, is to fill in the slip of paper with one act of kindness; one moment when you prayed for someone or reached out to help someone. Each of these acts is also an act of self-denial; an act of placing the well-being of another before your own. As we complete our slips of paper and insert them into the wire body of Christ, we will see how we are becoming the body of Christ at work in the world. We will witness our collective Lenten ministry and practice.

There is also a poem on the insert entitled "Practicing Lent." The poem is by Father Pat Keleher, the chaplain of the UB North Campus Newman Center written for this Lent and used with his permission.

Take the poem home with you and read it aloud in a quiet place. Read it each day of the week, be open to the images and associations you receive from it.

The work we embark upon today, together, as Christ's body is serious business. "No Spring cleaning job" as Father Pat says in his poem, "cutting calories or Lenten resolutions for only forty days; but the reverse: a Eucharistic rush for all to be companions at the table."

In a world so torn, so shredded by war; in a nation so divided, so fragmented by extremist politicians; we need now, more than ever, an encompassing vision big enough to include all people.

From gay and lesbian marriages in recalcitrant Alabama to humane immigration policies for Hispanic families with children; for equitable, living wages for all workers not just the disproportionate millions of annual compensation for CEOs; for trust and justice among people of color and law enforcement; for religious dialogue rather than religious extremism.

A vision big enough to include all people needs to be a vision honest enough to name our flaws; honest enough to make us uncomfortable before it makes us well. We say on Ash Wednesday that we impose the ashes of repentance. I can't think of a better word; it is an imposition to be reminded of my need to confess; of my mortality and frailty.

"Why should we love the church," asked T. S. Eliot. "Because the church tells us unpleasant facts of life," he answered.

Maybe we should love the church for imposing on us these unpleasant truths, but that's also why we avoid the church. There are always less people on Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday of Lent than on Easter.

Church reminds us we spend a lot of time, effort and resources avoiding the truth that we come from dust and to dust we shall return.

We work out, we eat yogurt, we put on makeup, we have phrases like, "If anything happens to me" in our attempt to avoid the ultimate imposition which is death.

But we come to church to have a greater truth imposed on us as well:

It is the old, old story the Bible tells us from beginning to end: that even when we were at our worst, even when we had all but exhausted God's generosity and patience, even in the mere dust and ashes that we eventually become again, we come here to remember His promise to Noah and his family and to all generations.

The truth we come here to learn again and again is quite simple:

nothing can separate us from the love of God and his willingness to bet that if we could see and taste the joyful life of abundance he offers us we would turn to him and find our true selves and our true home forever. Amen.