

The 1st Sunday in Lent: Holy Trinity Church: February 18, 2018

Genesis 9: 8-17: *Noah and the Heart of our God*

Preached

By

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

I read something interesting about the famous novelist Charles Dickens. It seems that Dickens wrote all his great stories in installments. Week after week, Dickens would spin out his tales and the English public would breathlessly wait to see what was going to happen next to such characters as Oliver Twist, Pip, Miss Havisham, and all the other great characters Dickens created. Dickens used to say that when he began a novel, he really had no idea how the story would end. He said that his characters, which began as figments of his imagination, quickly assumed a life of their own. Sometimes they made decisions that surprised him as the author. While Dickens thought that he was the sole author constructing the narrative, his characters were busy taking the story in a direction that he, the author, had not originally intended.

When I read that, I couldn't help but think of the creation of human beings.

When God created us, God did the most shocking thing. God gave us that wonderful and terrible gift of free will. God gave us the freedom to decide our own destiny. Think about the implications of that truth for a moment. God created us to be free moral agents.

Many theologians believe that this is what the writer of Genesis meant when it was written that God created man and woman in God's own image. It didn't mean that we look like God. The scriptures are quite clear. God is Spirit and we are flesh. We have no idea what God looks like, but chances are it's nothing like us. No, the way we are like God is that we can think and dream and most importantly of all, we can decide which of the things we think about and dream about are worth our time. We can decide which of the things we think about and dream about that are in our best interest and the best interest of others with whom we share this planet we call earth. We are free to be all we can be or we are free to destroy ourselves and everything good in our lives.

Can you imagine God taking such a risk? Surely God realized that we might give in to our dark sides. Surely God realized that we might disappoint Him. But God did it anyway. Obviously God didn't want to share the world with a bunch of puppets where as our puppeteer would always be pulling the strings.

No, God wanted creatures God could love and who would love Him in return. But what a risk! What if these beings that God created and whom God loved decided they didn't want to have anything at all to do with God?

That brings us to our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures from the book of Genesis. It is the story of Noah, one of the best known and best loved stories in the Scripture. You know the story. God created humankind in God's image, giving us the freedom to decide our destiny, and what did we do? Certainly not what was pleasing to God. We read in Genesis 6: "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, 'I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground for I regret that I have made them'"

Some might say that God would still say the same thing today. Just look at what happened in Parkland Florida this past week. Seventeen people are murdered, 3 adults and 14 children, in a high school by a former student who chose to commit this heinous act. Think of the ripple effect of this evil act caused by a single gun man. Think of the families. Think of the extended families. Think of the all those loved ones. Think of all those friends of the

people who are burying their children and spouses. My brothers and sisters, is there any greater sadness a parent to bear than burying their child or to bury a beloved spouse? Their deaths not caused by disease or accident, but caused by an evil decision and act.

As humorist Will Rogers once said, “God made man a little lower than the angels. Man has been getting lower ever since.” Mark Twain once said, “Man is the creature made at the end of the week’s work when God was tired.” This, said Twain, explains everything.

Do you ever wonder why people do the crazy things they do? People are amazing! Emergency room physicians see a multitude of injuries that result from simple stupidity. A friend of my father’s tells the story of one man who was brought in to the ER with serious injuries to his face and teeth. The doctor was appalled to learn how the man injured himself. While driving drunk around his neighborhood, a man was lighting firecrackers off his cigarette and then throwing the firecrackers out the window. He was having a grand old time until he accidentally threw his cigarette out the window and stuck the firecracker in his mouth. Man oh man that had to hurt!

Either from a flawed nature or from pure stupidity, we as a species, even at our best are certainly a disappointment to our Creator. The story of Noah and the flood is the culmination of that disappointment.

Let me ask you a question, who do you think is the most tragic character in the Bible? Is it Judas? Is it the prophet Jeremiah or Ezekiel? I think God is the most tragic character in the Bible. Look directly to the fact that in the beginning, God had declared God's Creation to be very good. But only a few generations later, by the time of Noah, God was so dismayed over humanity's corruption that God regretted creating humans beings in the first place. God was so disappointed in humanity that God decided to wipe the slate clean and start all over. God sent the great flood to destroy all life on the earth. Except God decided to save a remnant: Noah and his family, as well as, two of every kind of animal on the earth.

This is important. God allowed a remnant to remain. You see, the scriptures tell us quite clearly that God never gives up hope on God's beloved people. You and I would give up. We would decide to cut our losses, walk away and conclude that humanity is hopeless, but not God. Francis Thompson called God the "Hound of Heaven" who pursues us "down the labyrinthine ways." Regardless of how far we run away from God and God's love, God remains in

pursuit of you and me. Even when we feel lost and in the shadow of death, even when we feel insufficient to know God's grace, we shall not fear for God is ever with us and will never leave us to face our perils alone. God sees us and offers us healing. God cares when we are in pain, suffering and hurt by others. Even though we human beings often face injustice, racism, sexism, poverty, hunger, disease, sickness, oppression, war after war in this world at the hands of one another, God's healing and compassion prevails for God's creation for eternity.

I think about my Carol and the nights she delivered our children: Brian, Dennis and Amy. Just think about the natural love of a mom for a newborn baby. Your baby didn't even tell you she was coming. She just came, and what a coming. She rendered you a barbarian. You screamed. You swore like a fleet sailor. And now, look at you. Your back aches, your head pounds, your body is drenched in sweat. Every muscle is strained and stretched. You should be angry, but are you, far from it. On your face is a for-longer-than-ever love. That baby has done nothing for you, yet you love her. She's brought pain to your body and nausea to months of mornings, yet you treasure her. Her face is wrinkled and her eyes dim, yet all you can talk about are her good looks and bright future. She's going to wake you up every night for the next God only knows many months, but that doesn't matter. I can see it on your face.

You're crazy about her. My sisters and brothers in Christ that is the way God felt about Israel, and that is the way God feels about you and me.

So, after the waters subside, and Noah leaves the ark, what does Noah do?

Noah gets drunk and lies naked in his tent. This was a no-no in Jewish culture.

But do you see the irony in this quaint story? God chooses the only righteous man on earth and he turns out to be not so completely righteous at all.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, this is where our story begins. This is where the human person's salvation begins. God is disappointed with humanity. But fortunately, that is not how the story ends. The waters recede and God puts a rainbow in the heavens as a sign of God's eternal grace. God makes a covenant with humanity. Never again will God send great floods to envelope the earth. Of course, on the cross of Calvary God's Son Jesus makes a new covenant for us, a covenant that says that we who seek to have the Son of God's heart in their life will never die. Yes, we have free will. And sometimes we stumble and fall. But God never gives up on us. Remember that the next time you see a rainbow. Amen.