

February 18, 2024  
The First Sunday in Lent, Year B  
Genesis 9:8-17  
Mark 1:9-15  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
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### In the Beginning

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) Put another way, “In that day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” (Genesis 2:4b) God created a human creature, with love and care, out of the dust of the ground, and breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the human creature and the man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden in Eden and placed the man in the garden. In that garden was every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food and the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

God brought out of the ground every animal of the field and every bird of the air, for it was not good that the man be alone. But after the man had named every creature of the earth and the sky there was not found a companion for him.

So, the LORD God caused a deep slumber to fall upon the man and from the man God took a woman and brought her to the man and the man welcomed the woman as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. The man and the woman lived at peace with each other and with God and with all of the creatures of the garden, eating freely of the fruit of the trees that God had given them, including the tree of life.

But the man and the woman were tempted in the garden, for there was one tree of which they could not eat, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent tempted them with the promise, that they would be like God, if they but stretched out their hands and took the fruit and ate. So first the woman and then the man ate of the forbidden fruit and their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked. They knew shame for the first time, and they hid from each other and from God.

The peace of the garden was shattered. The peace they had shared with each other, with the animals, with the earth itself, and even with God, for God knew that they had broken their promise, broken the covenant. They had eaten of the tree of which God had commanded them

not to eat. Then they blamed. The woman blamed the serpent tempter, the man blamed the woman and even blamed God, “The woman **whom you gave to me**, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:12)

With those words, words of accusation and not confession, words of blame and not contrition, the beginning was over.

Much later, in the beginning, a new beginning, there was a man, a man God had determined to be righteous, out of all of the people of the world. A man God had deemed to be worthy to be the new father of all humanity, and his name was Noah, a man who found favor in the sight of the LORD. Noah obeyed God when God said, “Make for yourself an ark of cypress wood...and of every living thing of all flesh you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.” (Genesis 6:14, 19)

Noah and his household; his wife and his sons and their wives survived the great flood that was let loose on the earth. The waters of chaos and uncreation rose up around them and fell from the firmament, and the world around them vanished, the homes and buildings, the dry land, the tallest trees, even the highest mountains were swallowed up in the waters of the flood. It was an uncreation, for the LORD regretted that he had made the human creatures who had so violated the creation, each other, and their relationship with God.

Forty days and forty nights is only part of the story. The waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days, and then three more months when the waters finally dried up and Noah and his family could go out of the ark.

And then God made a new covenant with Noah and his family and with all the creatures of the earth. The covenant that is our Old Testament reading for today. The covenant that God would never again go to war against creation. The covenant that God would hang God’s war bow in the heavens, never to be touched again. The covenant that God would never again let the waters of chaos flow, would never again let the forces of uncreation loose, the promise that God would again live in peace with humanity, with a cleansed creation, with a restored humanity, with the descendants of Noah and his children as they multiplied and filled the earth.

God kept the covenant that God had made with Noah and with all of creation. But before much time had passed, the human beings had started to turn away from God.

Over and over again human beings betrayed the relationship that God had invited them into once again. They destroyed each other, they destroyed creation, they sought their own power, they sought to replace God.

And over and over again God made new covenants with them, promising them the goodness that flows from relationship with God. And over and over again, human beings broke the covenant. The new beginning was shattered.

At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Jesus went down, into the waters of the river, a symbol of rebirth, of washing, of becoming a new creation. When Jesus came up out of the water, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:10-11)

In the beginning Jesus was sent out into the wilderness; like Adam and Eve expelled from the garden; like Noah and his family, on the wilderness of the sea for forty days and forty nights. And like Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus was tempted.

Mark does not tell us what temptations Jesus endured. He doesn't tell us what Satan, the accuser, the adversary, told Jesus, offered Jesus, in order to get him to break the covenant that God had made with him.

Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus clung to the words of scripture to resist the temptations of Satan. Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus had the strength to resist the words of the tempter. Mark doesn't even tell us, in so many words, what the outcome of this struggle was. But look and see what happened. Jesus was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him.

It could sound like Jesus was under attack from the wild beasts, but I think that we should read it, instead, as a restoration. When Adam and Eve were in the garden, they lived in peace and harmony with the wild beasts. And now as Jesus, the beloved son, resists the temptations of the deceiver, we find the wilderness restored to the peace of the garden. Jesus was with the wild beasts and the wild beasts did not harm him. The created order lived in companionship with Jesus and the spiritual powers of goodness, the servants of God, served him. It was a new beginning, a new creation.

And when the time of temptation and garden peace in the wilderness was over, when John, who had prepared the way for Jesus, was arrested, when the time was fulfilled, when the whole creation was ready for restoration, for peace, for a new beginning, Jesus stepped out of the wilderness turned garden, and spoke words of good news, words of hope, words of change. That the kingdom of God, the reign of God had come near. That the reign of God was right there, in him, in Jesus.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. And we are invited to live in the good news of the reign of God come near. We are invited to live in the peace of the new creation. We are invited to turn away from the words of the tempter, words that tempt us to live only for ourselves, words that tempt us to replace God's justice and mercy with our own judgment, words that tempt us to have disdain for our neighbors and for strangers, words that tempt us to despoil and destroy God's beloved creation. We are invited to make a new start. The time is fulfilled. The time is now. It is the beginning. Amen.