

An Accounting for Our Hope 2021  
 Genesis 9:8-17 1 Peter 3:8-9, 13-18

Genesis 9:1, 8-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 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.’ God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

1 Peter 3:8-9, 13-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.

**Today, the first Sunday of Lent, and we’re near the beginning  
 of our spiritual journey walking with Jesus toward Easter.**

Yes, it would probably be more pleasant, convenient and easier  
 if we could move right into the joyful celebration of Easter,  
 and just skip the unpleasantness and messiness  
 of betrayal, abandonment, crucifixion and death.

**But that’s not how it works,  
 for if there is no death, then there can be no resurrection.**

Lent is our season to listen and seek to hear God's will and voice,  
 for self-examination and exploration so to deepen our faith  
 by letting go of destructive distractions, our fear and guilt...

**... and that’s a task for which we do need to be diligent & attentive.**

And anything else is to settle for significantly less  
than the abundant grace and full blessings God intends.

Some Christian traditions focus on giving up pleasures for Lent,  
or on our human sin, failures, faults and short-comings,  
and on the terrible suffering and death that Jesus endured...  
... **but that's not the whole story.**

I know that Lenten sermons are typically about sin, shame & guilt,  
filled with sorrow and grief, and with lots of sadness & regret  
and focused on the terror and fear of God's coming judgment...  
... **but I can't seem to get past God's steadfast and gracious love.**

Yes, certainly it is appropriate to examine our faith and living,  
and for us to consider our sin & the terrible sufferings of Christ.  
But it's also important not to lose sight of God's unending love  
and the Lord's promises that provide us with hope, peace & joy.

And though it may not sound all that Lenten or penitent,  
truly each one of you are the Lord's own precious child,  
and you are indeed deeply and intimately loved by God.  
In fact, the Lord is very much pleased to have created you,  
Jesus loves you and is pleased with who you really are,  
and will help you fulfill the very best as God intends.

Rather than a self-focused season of self-inflicted deprivation,  
and a Lent that emphasizes what we give up and turn away from,  
my emphasis is what I am turning toward, **the blessings of God.**

Yes do some **soul-searching**, but focus more on **God-searching**, and  
reflecting on amazing depth and nature of the Lord's love & mercy.

**Biblical hope arises from our confidence in God and in God's love.**  
**It's our confident assurance that God is indeed gracious & good.**

When I read this Genesis passage and try to picture the scene,  
I flashback to my experiences, the day after a major hurricane.

The storm-weathered ark is standing beaten and empty - abandoned.  
I imagine Noah and his family in a group huddled together  
stunned, looking wide-eyed out over the muddy destruction...  
... a soggy, smelly, discouraging wasteland of death.

Seeing such overwhelming devastation, they've got to be thinking,  
"OK, now don't anybody do anything that might ever make God that mad again!"

And so aware of their anxiety and fear of suffering another flood,  
God makes an unqualified covenant promise, that's **pure grace**,  
"I promise, never again, with no stipulations or demands,  
and not a word in the text about what Noah is expected to do.

This covenant with Noah's family and all of creation rests entirely  
upon God's steadfast faithfulness and unrestrained compassion  
that is promised to flow **regardless of human response**, vs. 11  
Then God said ... "As for me, I am establishing my covenant... 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."

And because of this unqualified and unrestrained, "never again",  
the story takes a radical turn away from judgment and wrath,

**toward unlimited grace with no exclusions despite human sin.**

vs. 9:12~16

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ... I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

The flood story is not really about what happens when God gets mad,  
but rather **it's a story of God's incredible grace, love & mercy.**

The rain came as a flood of judgment against human sin & depravity,  
but the sunlight shining through rain drops  
**transforms the storm into a beautiful rainbow,**  
just as we are transformed by Jesus, the Light of the world,  
when the grace of Jesus shines through us out into the world...

**...so the rainbow is a forever-sign of God's love, grace and healing,**  
which means that we are not trying to earn or deserve God's favor  
rather, we're trying to respond to a gift, **that's already ours.**

It is not a self-confidence that we ourselves can defeat evil  
or that we can withstand the storm by our own will or strength,  
**but it is a certainty in God and in God's promises,**  
**and that** becomes the source of our power & strength,  
and the truth & hope by which God calls us to live.

That is a part of God's promise, as God's purpose **becomes our hope.**  
That's why a generation ago, Carl Barth, a Swiss theologian  
would often say that preaching should be done  
with a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

He did not mean that the church, pulpit and preaching should become  
a platform for our personal politics, but that **Scripture should**  
**be used to interpret world events and the issues of our lives.**

My intend & purpose today is not partisan politics, but to reflect  
on how grace and our relationship with Jesus Christ **as revealed**  
**in the teachings and truth of Scripture is the appropriate**  
**lens through which we perceive and interpret world events,**  
**and our guide for how we live & respond out in the world.**

Corruption, injustice & violence diminish human life in this world  
polarizing hatred and bitterness infects our national politics,  
& months of adjustments to Covid-19 danger, isolation & anxiety,  
**makes us weary with frustration, rancor, stress and uncertainty.**

**So how do we as Christians think about, interpret**  
**and respond faithfully to such things in our world? ...**  
**... How is what we are feeling and thinking, saying and doing**  
**being informed by our faith and by the truths of Scripture?**

The Lenten lectionary reading for today from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter  
was written during a time of incredible pain and sorrow,  
during terrible persecution and wide-spread suffering.

Scholars believe it was written when Nero was emperor,  
who was determined to use the full force of the Roman Empire

to destroy and wipe-out entirely the Christian Church.

The faith-community of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, facing harsh threat and upheaval,  
and the real threat of imprisonment, torture or a brutal death,  
**was under pressure to deny & abandon their faith in Christ.**

But Peter suggests an alternative perspective of hope, vs. 14

But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, **you are blessed.** Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.

If you read through the entire letter of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, it's bold!

The author never once tells them to duck and hide or panic,  
or try to keep your faith in Jesus secret and hidden.

It also never says to strike back hard, and show your enemies  
that the people of God are not to be trifled with or threatened.

**Instead, it's a call to deal with troubles, hardship and upheaval  
by living gently, so to live with grace, hope and compassion...  
... and always be ready to explain the hope we have and live  
as an alternative to this world's ways of fear and panic.**

The message to those suffering and persecuted Christians  
was to try to live in a world hostile to their faith commitment,  
**by modeling their attitude, behavior and responses  
after the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ...**

... and to trust in God enough, **to both hope & endure.** vs. 8-9, 14~16, 18

"Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. ...Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but **in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.** Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you **an accounting for the hope that is in you;** yet do it with gentleness and reverence. ... For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God."

When Bishop Desmond Tutu was asked why he became an Anglican priest  
rather than joining a group to oppose & fight against apartheid,

his answer was that one time, when he was a little boy,  
he and his mother were walking down a street after a rainstorm,  
and tall, white man wearing a collar and in a black suit  
stepped off the sidewalk into the mud to let them pass.

Living under apartheid, the young Desmond Tutu was surprised,  
and he asked why the white man had treated them with respect.

His mother said, "Because he is a man of God. He is an Anglican priest."  
Tutu said that right then he decided to become a priest,  
and that from then on he wanted to be a man of God.  
**That Anglican priest's life gave an accounting for his hope.**

The truth is, the world does watch us, wanting to see how  
we will react and respond to temptation, trial and adversity...

**... to see if our faith, our hope and trust in the Lord  
really makes any discernable difference  
when our path in life gets twisted and difficult.**

Our Christian hope is far more than just wishful thinking.

It is not denying life's dangers, disappointments or fear,  
but is built on the foundation of God's gracious love,  
**and absolute certainty that God is good, his promises are true...**

**... and because Jesus is Lord, the ultimate outcome is certain,  
our destiny in God and God's purpose is decided & assured,  
and not even death can separate us from God's love.**

So did Jesus really mean it when he said in Matthew 5:43-44,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you,  
Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." ?

I do believe our world is becoming more dangerous and difficult,

**and I don't know God's purpose or intention in all this.**

But I do know that the Lord has not and will not be defeated...

**... which is truly an appropriate lesson for Lent.**

As I reflect on the events, dangers and brokenness of this world,  
and on even my own struggles with loss, defeat and disappointment,

I am reminded and encouraged by our readings today,  
that we can trust God to bring us through every struggle,  
be it cataclysmic flood, unrelenting persecution or whatever,  
for God is steadfast and faithful and sovereign,  
& will fulfill his every purpose, desire & plan...

... and what an amazing contrast we could be in our wounded world  
struggling, traumatized and angry --- **and we with joyful hope!**

**So rather than fear or panic, may my life and the way I am living  
be faithfully illuminated by God's love, hope, joy and grace...**

**... so that my life does give account for my hope that's from God,  
by serving as a caring dispenser of his love, healing & grace...  
... and so that people are be able to see God's grace and mercy in me...**

**... as I gratefully embrace each day as a sign of God's grace & hope  
for the amazingly wonderful gift & blessing that life truly is,  
and try to squeeze from it all the joy & delight God intends.**

Therefore, **I will not let hatred or bitterness inhabit my heart.**

During this season of Lent, I am asking the Lord to shine a Light,  
and to scrub & clean, & bring to healing all of my dark places.

So how does that effect how I intend to live out the season of Lent?

Since God does already love us & blesses us abundantly,  
I suggest these two steps for us during our Lent:

**1<sup>st</sup>** I want to know this God so loves me, even better & more fully,  
and if God has more, and if I can go deeper, **then I want it!**

So how can we each get to know and walk with Jesus more closely,  
this God of gracious love, promise and compassion even better?

**2<sup>nd</sup>** Let's explore whatever is limiting our faith, holding us back,  
or standing between us fulfilling God's good purpose for us.

What is it in our lives, deeds, words, attitudes & relationships  
that limits and holds us back from living fully God's blessing?

Today, may our lives declare with the psalmist: Psalm 134:8, 4

O taste and see that the Lord is good;

blessed are those who take refuge in him.

I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

**delivered me from all my fears**

and what an incredible Lenten blessing that would be!