

“Memory Troubles”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
February 18, 2018

Old Testament lesson: Genesis 9:8-17

New Testament lesson: 1 Peter 3:18-22

The chapel at Princeton University is the size of a small English cathedral, and it features many gargoyles and other sculpted designs. When I was touring the campus prior to entering seminary, the guide pointed out two rather odd features. A sculptor who worked on the chapel during its construction placed in an entrance way arch, small carvings of his face and the face of the supervising architect, Ralph Adams Cram. Cram’s face is identifiable by his glasses. A human gargoyle with glasses. Kinda funny.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the late British commentator on religious and moral issues, once pointed out two other examples of cathedral design, not as humorous, but as symbols for the life of faith. He pointed to the steeple and the gargoyle. The steeple symbolizes the heart reaching for God in the heavens, and the gargoyle reminds us of our earthbound limits and our own mortality.

Today’s scripture reading points to two other symbols for our faith life from the Old Testament – Noah’s arch and the rainbow. These symbols have, for many people, lost their impact and meaning. We have watered down Noah’s arch, so to speak, and looked right through the rainbow, forgetting that it once had greater meaning. Noah’s arch is the symbol of a torrential rain that flooded the whole earth, drowning everyone except Noah and his family. It was horrific.

And yet we remember it through cheery little children’s songs, such as *(the children sing)...*

Lord told Noah to build him an arky-arky

Build it out of gopher barky-barky.

It rained and it rained for forty days and nights and daysies

almost drove those animals crazy, crazy.

The sun came out and dried up the landy, landy.

Everything was fine and dandy, dandy.

Fine and dandy, except that nearly all life on the planet was wiped out. That’s an important thing to remember. Noah’s arch – and the rainbow – symbolize God’s view of us and all creation. From God’s perspective, in many ways there is no difference between us and creation. We are a part of creation. When we displease God, it taints and tarnishes all creation. We forget that, don’t we?

But it's not hard to see when we look around at the world. Just think of the impact we have on the earth – skyscrapers that block out the sun, neighborhoods that drive out wildlife, wars that terrorize and destroy, pollution that causes irreversible, unnatural climate change, and of course, senseless, horrific violence against one another.

We forget that when we are born, we don't come into the world; we come out of it, as in Genesis 2 when God forms humanity from dust and breaths life into us. That's what the ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us. From dust we came and to dust we shall return. It's humbling. We need to remember this.

We need to remember how delicately life is held together. How with one wrong move, it can all fall apart, blow away like dust in the wind, (another good song by the way, by the rock group Kansas.)

This is the first Sunday of Lent, 40 days for us to spend some time remembering. Forty days to pay special attention to how God is working in our lives, according to God's covenant with humankind and all creation. Many people do this by giving up something – like chocolate, or smoking, or drinking, or eating (er, I mean skipping one meal a week and giving that money to Harvester's, as suggested in your bulletin).

We give up something – or take on a new spiritual discipline – in order to see what the Lord will do when we make a little extra room for him. It helps us remember God and our relationship to God. God says, "When I bring clouds over the earth and the (rainbow) 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. ... This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

God points out the covenant about a million times in today's reading. "My covenant, ... the covenant, ... my covenant, ... covenant, ... covenant, ... covenant" – seven times in just 10 verses. That's a lot of remembering. Do you think God has memory troubles? Of course not. It's we who have the memory troubles. When we forget God's covenant with us, we have troubles, horrific troubles.

During Lent, we remember what God has done for us, particularly in sending Jesus, who triumphs over all our troubles and leads us to peace and reconciliation, when we stop to remember him in our daily lives. We remember the cross – God's new symbol of covenant with us – 2,000 years old and yet new enough to us that we still fail to live into it's grace and mercy for us and all creation.

In the cross, we remember Jesus' suffering, and in that, we learning to accept our own. We remember Jesus' forgiveness – when he said, “Forgiven them for they know not what they do” – and so we remember to forgive one another. We remember the Lord's grace and mercy – when Jesus said to the criminal hanging next to him, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” We remember God's love, and we are inspired to show each other the same unconditional, familial love – the love Jesus showed when upon his death he entrusted his mother to the Apostle John. We remember God's wisdom and our foolishness – where Paul calls the cross foolishness to those who are perishing but for us who believe, the cross is the power and wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 18-20)

We remember. We remember that powerlessness, nakedness, and even death are not the worst things that could happen to us, but rather faithlessness, despair, and life apart from God – that is what we risk when we forget about God and all that the Lord has done for us in Christ. We have memory troubles. We need to be reminded. We need God's rainbow stretching out across the earth. We need the cross of Jesus, reaching up to God, and across to us and our fellow human beings. We need to remember.

Take time this Lenten season to remember. Find a way each day to remind yourself to stop and thank God. Open up a place each week to invite God in, to sit alongside you – in prayer or meditation, or by letting go of something that's crowding God out. Give of yourself anonymously, just between you and God.

When we enter into such sacred spaces and practices with God, God breaks through the darkness with a rainbow of holy light, a cup of joy overflowing, green sprigs of renewed hope, a gentle dove that brings a deep, abiding peace.

Light, joy, hope and peace – that is what's available to you and me this Lenten Season, when we remember to enter into deeper relationship with the Lord.

Pull out your smartphones or calendars right now and give yourself that reminder – “set aside time for the Lord.” Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, we are ever in need of your presence in our lives, and particularly in times of loss, illness, physical rehab, and senseless violence.

We ask your peace upon all who grieve the loss of loved ones, and your Spirit of strength and renewal upon all dealing with illness, surgery or disease.

We ask, too, O Lord, that you would make us mindful of your presence in our lives and in are world. There are times, like now, when question our place in this world of senseless violence.

We are angry, afraid, and frustrated. We mourn the loss of life in Parkland, Fla., and the too-many-other communities who know it all too well.

Help us, O Lord, to find a way forward toward the peace and love that you embody.

Guide our leaders toward decisions that reflect your Spirit of life and community, healing and wholeness.

And where we can have a positive role in helping to bring this about, give us the wisdom and the courage to act on your behalf.

For it is you who we follow and serve, seeking to live out the prayer that you gave to us, that we might live in right relationship with God and with one another, as we pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**