

A God Who Eschews Power—Genesis 9: 8-17
(February 18, 2024-First Sunday in Lent)

(Prior to the reflection, the congregation watched an edited version of the video, [Unhitching White Supremacy](#), with Rev. Jacqui Lewis from the Work of the People video subscription service)

This year was one of those years where Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day fell on the same day. On Tuesday at the Worship and Music Committee meeting I share a story about a meme I come across on a United Church Minister’s Facebook group. It shows a picture of a Minister with a clergy collar, a slightly crazed look on their face and a big black smudge on their forehead that only slightly resembles a cross. On the top half of the image are the words, “What are you doing for Valentine’s Day this year?” and on the bottom is the reply, “I’m rubbing dirt on people’s foreheads and telling them they’re all going to die.” Here’s the church out of step with the culture again. While Christmas is easily marketable, Ash Wednesday and Lent, not so much.

Only a few weeks ago it was all “joy to the world” and “go tell it on the mountain”, and here we are on the road to Jerusalem. You know where that leads. Why do we do this? Because thousands of years of spiritual practice have taught us that the way to God, the way to see and to live into the truth of a God-infused universe is not through achievement and competition but rather by letting go, by dying to the things that get in the way of seeing things as they are. These are mostly ego and fear. So, the journey of Lent, is about joining Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem—it’s a journey to the cross, where through introspection and repentance we die to the things that get in the way of resurrection.

The beginning of Lent also occurs during Black History Month, so this week I’m thinking about the connection between the two. I’m holding the scripture in my heart and mind and at the same time reflecting on a book we’ve been studying at the Council meetings called *Wait is this Racist? A Guide to Becoming an Anti-Racist Church* by Kerry Connelly.

When I read the scripture this week, I’m struck by verse 11, especially the words, “*never again*”; “*I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood.*” “*Never again*”; Is the writer of this story telling us that God feels remorse, that God learns from this experience and is now making a change? In fact, there is an entire branch of theology called process theology that claims just this, God does indeed change, God learns from experience. The new covenant after the flood seems to signal a change in how God operates in the life of Israel: “*never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood.*” It’s the realization that a loving relationship with humanity can’t be built by force and manipulation. God’s power rests not on the coercive force of a flood but on the promise of the rainbow, of a God who will forevermore be guided by mercy, of a God who becomes weak for our sake.

I’m reminded of a line in the Connelly book that similarly strikes me; “...churches have the potential to be a massive influence for justice in our world. If—and that’s a big if—

we are actually willing to engage in a divestment of power.” Isn’t that what God is doing in the flood story, divesting himself of power, revealing God’s commitment to relationship and reconciliation over domination and destruction.

The Lenten journey and the journey of the predominately white church are very similar, they’re both about divesting ourselves of power to open ourselves up to the possibility of resurrection, of putting ourselves on a path where God can do a new thing with us. Back in the seventies a prominent, wealthy, mostly white New York City church invites a well-known Pastor and civil rights leader to come speak to them. He gets up in the pulpit, for a good while looks out in silence at the congregation, looks up at the beautiful stain glass windows, runs his hands along the gorgeously carved wood pulpit and finally says, “I know why you invited me here, you want to know how your church can be a part of better relations between the races...” he stops, looks around again, sweeps his arm from his chest out and upward and finishes with, “...and keep all this.” The truth is if we want the beloved community Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said is the end result of anti-racism then the white church needs to get introspective, repent and change by divesting ourselves of power. So, what might that look like in worship, in our outreach, in children and youth ministry, in the use of the church property, in pastoral care?

That’s what the Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis refers to in the video, the necessity of moving the church from the Church of Constantine and empire to the Church of Jesus—the poor, homeless, refugee saviour who dies a common criminal.

Friends that’s the Lenten journey, it’s the coming together of all of Jesus’ teachings in one season—“the last shall be first and the first shall be last”, “let the little children come to me because it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs”, “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the kingdom of God”, “take up your cross and follow me, in response to the devil’s temptation to rule all the kingdom’s of the world “worship and serve the Lord your God only”, in response to Peter who pleaded with Jesus not to go to Jerusalem “get behind me Satan...for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Jesus’ journey is the ultimate divestment in power.

Lent and anti-racism both require humility, courage, and comfort with a certain amount of discomfort. Yet in these journeys of divestment of power, there is hope to sustain us. Hope that God is with us every step of the way. Hope of what’s on the other side of the Lenten and anti-racist journey—a world where all are valued, cherished, and loved. The grace is the assurance that “despair and disillusionment are not dead ends but signs of impending resurrection.”¹ May God bless our Lenten and anti-racist journeys.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

¹ Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, Jossey-Bass, 2008, p. 33.