

Hannover International Worship
18 February 2018

Genesis 9: 8-17
Mark 1: 9-15

It's always lovely to worship with you on a monthly basis and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to share some reflections on our Scripture passages with you this morning. Thank you for the community you have been to me and to my family since our arrival in Hannover!

We had an interesting convergence of holy days this week Wednesday didn't we? On Wednesday we had not only the start of Lent with Ash Wednesday but it just happened to be Valentine's Day as well! I noticed that one church here in Hannover had an Ash Wednesday service and then later in the evening followed it up with a worship service blessing love for Valentine's Day as well! We made some jokes that we're sure plenty of people purchased chocolates for their loved one and then proceeded not to eat any because they gave up chocolate for Lent.

But all joking aside, what at first glance seemed like an odd pairing of days to acknowledge actually, in the end, seems quite fitting to me. I had this filter before my eyes of *love* and *Lent* as I reflected on our passages for today so keep in mind I approached these texts with a certain perspective that I hope you will share by the end.

Growing up my family didn't participate in the spiritual discipline of Lenten habits like my Catholic friends did. I was always envious of one friend in particular whose family didn't eat meat on Fridays during Lent – but that meant they always got to go to McDonald's for fish sandwiches! As a young person, that always seemed like a habit I could get into! In the past decade or so it has become our habit to add something to our spiritual practices during the time of Lent so we choose something each year to memorize or to add to our habits at home. It has been an encouraging habit to add to our Christian yearly calendar and it's a habit I am grateful to do with my family. I'm not sure if you are one to acknowledge this season leading up to Easter but today I would like to put forward the acronym LENT for us to consider. L.E.N.T.

L – is for love. But this isn't the romantic love of Valentine's Day, this is covenantal love as found in both the story of Noah and Jesus' baptism. In both our Old Testament and Gospel stories from today we have God's movement of love towards his people in his symbols of covenant, eternal promises, for God's people. We have the familiar flood story with the promise of God in the symbol of the rainbow to never again destroy the earth. In one of the children's Bible my kids read from time to time, it describes the rainbow as God hanging up his bow and arrow of anger with creation, and setting this symbol in the sky as a promise of love for all creation. Time and again God promises to love us and to find a way to bridge the gap of sin as established in the Garden of Eden. And time and again we as humanity find a way to break and diminish that covenant by being unfaithful to God. We put up for

ourselves false idols of love: money, power, sex, violence, food, mindless entertainment, going so far as to trade in those goods that whisk us farther from God's heart on a daily basis. We hear of more deadly shootings, unwilling to let go of our greed and false freedoms. We hear of human trafficking, unwilling to look in the eye the reality of corruption and abuse that happens right in front of us. These false idols of love shout for our attention. But finally and wonderfully, in the person of Jesus, God establishes an unbreakable covenant with us forever. Today God speaks and reminds us Jesus is the Beloved one in whom God reaches towards us in love.

E – is for everyone. This covenantal love is for everyone. “This rainbow covenant represents radical inclusivity in the heart of this narrative... The covenant between God and all flesh is between God and every person for all time, including but not limited to those who can trace their ancestry to Noah and all of their descendants forever.” – Wil Gafney This radical love of God for everyone can be quite challenging – we tend to prefer people to look like us and act like us, to follow the rules of faith in order to be blessed with the love of God. But God's faithfulness, God's fidelity, is for all people and our role as Christians is to proclaim as Jesus did, “The kingdom of God is near!”

N – is for nudge. The nudge of the Spirit is one of gentleness. At the baptism of Jesus the dove descends on him like a dove. The symbol of the dove here is one of gentleness in balanced relation to the heavens being torn open. Often the Old Testament understanding of God is one of tyranny, anger and vengeance. Here God indicates for us the radical truth of God's character and that is one of gentleness. God has, time and again, established his promises with us through covenants old and new and through this symbol of the dove we are nudged in the direction of love and gentleness. The God of our Lord and Savior isn't one to berate us into devotion but one who gently invites us to join in the movement of his kingdom.

T – is for turn. “Repentance is not feeling miserable over our sins or regretting that we haven't been more religious. To repent is to turn our minds God-ward: a 180-degree turn-around from kingdoms of our own making towards God's rectifying power. ‘Belief’ in Mark is not creedal or even particularly cognitive: pistis is trust, laying less in the head and more in the gut. After unfurling our sails to catch the Spirit's current, we rely on God's ability to carry us beyond the storms or squalls of life.” -- Clifton Black

For those of you who hear me preach on a regular basis you know that I love the author Anne Lamott. She is a writer from San Francisco and has such a great sense of humor and an unique way of seeing the world and faith and describing things in such a way that strike my heart on a regular basis. Allow me to share with you her story of conversion as found in her book “Traveling Mercies.” She writes, “After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was

Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.' I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with. Finally I fell asleep and in the morning he was gone. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left. And one week later, I went back to church...It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me. I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, 'Screw it: I quit.' I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.' This was my beautiful moment of conversion."

Alistair McIntyre rightly inquires of us all, "What am I to do? If I have answered the prior question 'Of what story or stories am I a part of?' Friends, as you put into practice these ideas of Lent, L.E.N.T., I invite you to consider what story you want to be a part of. This story of radical faithfulness of God invites us to turn our lives back towards our maker, redeemer and sustainer to be a part of extending that good news to those around us. It is a gentle love that transforms places of desert to ones of blessing. It is a gentle love that reminds all God's kingdom is near. It is a gentle love that invites everyone to believe. May our Lenten journey be filled with grace and gentleness, AMEN.

On this day we give you thanks for the winter Olympics in South Korea. Thank you for the steps of peace made by north and south Koreans alike. May they continue to soften their stance towards one another and may you bring long-standing peace to the peninsula. We thank you also for the amazing display of athleticism – may you continue to watch over the athletes and may your Spirit surround the rest of the days of the games.

We also pray for those near us: we pray for the churches and witness of those in Hamburg and Bremen, for those in Hildesheim and Kassel, for those in Celle – may your gentle spirit of witness empower Christians in those areas to share your good news with those in their midst.

Fill us with your strength Lord
to resist the seductions of our foolish desires
and the tempter's vain delights,
that we may walk in obedience and righteousness,
rejoicing in you with an upright heart.

We pray for those in the United States with hard hearts with a grip of fear that will not let go. We pray for transformation of hearts and minds so that the addiction to guns and wealth will not have the last word, but that steps towards ending gun violence might take place. We pray in the name of Jesus.

God of our salvation,
your bow in the clouds
proclaims your covenant with every living creature.
Teach us your paths and lead us in your truth,
that by your Holy Spirit,
we may remember our baptismal vows
and be keepers of your trust with earth and its inhabitants. We pray that you will walk with us now Lord through the rest of the season of Lent that we might be soft to the nudgings of your Spirit that we might extend your gentleness to all that we meet. We pray this in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray...