

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 1, 2009

Lent 1B 2009

In the name of our one ever faithful living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Lent, as every Lent, we are going on a journey. We are headed towards Jerusalem with Jesus and his disciples. All our Lenten readings point to the events there over 2,000 years ago. Why did they happen? What do they mean for us now as we walk our spiritual journeys in 2009?

Our reading today from Genesis is a myth going back to the earliest days of pre-history. God had created the human race and set out from Eden with Adam and Eve expecting a peaceful group of vegetarians to emerge. But such is not the human condition. It didn't turn out as God had planned and it grieved him that every thought of the human heart was for evil. God regretted that He had created humans and was determined to just blot them out with a great flood. An expedient answer, but there was one wrinkle – Noah had found favor in God's sight. Hence the ark and all the animals.

In today's lesson, Noah, his family and all the animals are again on dry land. God now makes a covenant with Noah that he will never again destroy all flesh and the earth. Covenants in ancient times always required a sign or symbol as a record of them. Here God's sign is placing his bow, his warrior's weapon in the sky, as a sign of his covenant with Noah.

God's covenant with Noah is an unusual one in the Bible. It is unilateral. Noah did not have to promise or do anything. Here God is promising Noah and all

future generations that God will not abandon them. God is freely giving God's promise of unconditional love and faithfulness. We have a lot of rainbows here in Hawai'i. If you were her in Lahaina last week you would have seen a magnificent double rainbow over the West Maui Mountains and a huge rainbow makai side framing the island of Lana'i. It is good to be reminded that they mean that rains, be they from the clouds in the sky or from the clouds in our lives, will always end. There is hope. Noah later on in the story makes wine to forget, but God makes rainbows to remember God's promise of eternal faithfulness.

If today's Gospel lesson sounds familiar, you have a good memory. It was our Gospel seven Sundays ago on the first Sunday after Epiphany. The first Sunday of Lent's gospel lesson is always about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Since Mark's account is so short, the account of Jesus' baptism by John is thrown in. It made me look more carefully at the connection between baptism and our relationship with God. Jesus' left his life in Nazareth to receive John's baptism of repentance, he sees the heavens torn apart, the Spirit descend upon him and hears the voice declaring, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." The account tells us that it was the Spirit who immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

Jesus stayed out in the wilderness for forty days. Mark simply states of this period that "he was tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." I like that Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, leaves this account of Jesus' temptation so open ended. Jesus had a lot to sort out about his Messianic vocation. Such a change in status and perspective had to be tested. This is totally biblical. Abraham was tested and so was Moses. The Israelites were tested during their forty years in the desert. This is also so totally human. Every change in status or

perspective is followed by tests and trials of one kind or another. Do you remember your first days in school? How about dating? The early years of marriage or parenthood? Some of us may have basic training in the military burned into our memories. No other human can comprehend the testing that follows recognition of being the Son of God, the savior and redeemer of the world. Mark has the good sense to just leave it at that.

Most, if not all, of us have been baptized. As a priest, I perform the acts – asking the questions of the baptismal covenant where we affirm our faith and make our promises to God, the pouring of water and saying the words, the anointing with chrism and declaring that the baptized is “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.” For me, baptizing is one of the best things about being a priest. But I am just the officiant, the covenant is with God and it is God who acts accepting the newly baptized unconditionally as a child of God, part of the divine Ohana.

Martin Luther once said that baptism takes moments to accomplish but a lifetime to complete. We grow in our spiritual lives and each step is always a time of trial and testing. What does it mean *now* to proclaim by word and example the Good News? What does it mean *now* to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to love my neighbor as myself? What does it mean *now* to seek justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being? Those are not ceremonial liturgical words. That’s our job description!

Lent is a time to pause and ask these questions. It is not easy to stop and pause. We are restless beings. We want to see, do and drink in every possible experience in the whole world. We want to know everything perfectly. We want to know ourselves, others and God completely. We feel that way not because we are greedy or

overachievers, but simply because we are human. St. Augustine once said, “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” His autobiography and our own lives teach us that we are not like house cats – we are not restful beings who occasionally get restless; we are restless beings who occasionally get some rest! We want the simplicity of the perfect peace of resting in God – and we want everything else too!

We are complex and self-contradictory. We are often going full speed in a dozen different directions. Lent is a time to slow down, sort things out and perhaps find some rest. This might lead us to make some choices that will bring some simplicity, maybe just a little, to our complex nature and lives. We are only four days into it, so there’s still plenty of time. Down the other end of Front Street there is a little church with a big neon sign on its roof declaring, “Jesus Coming Soon.” I sometimes think we should put a sign up on our roof declaring, “Jesus Here Now.” The Kingdom is both here now and also not yet. We, by our baptism, are part of the Body of Christ working to bring us closer to God’s kingdom. Let’s pause for forty days and ponder what that means for us.

Amen.