

# Inkblots and Angels

A sermon based on Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15

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Our Gospel reading has an intriguing assortment of themes in it. The Gospel of Mark carries a lot less detail in its depiction of Jesus' baptism and temptations than do the other synoptic Gospels. Mark's prose is exceedingly spare, yet even in his clipped commentary there is an intriguing assortment of themes, one of which is the theme of blessing. We read that as Jesus was coming up out of the waters of his baptism, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1:10-11) The ultimate blessing—the blessing of God!

Then Jesus is immediately whisked off into the wilderness (1:12) which, at first glance, does not strike me as a blessing! Indeed, there he is "tempted by Satan," surrounded by "wild beasts," and tested to the breaking point by offers urging him to "sell out" his vision of redemption. Though Jesus was able to withstand the temptations, it must have been a most vulnerable experience, and quite literally, a bedevilling one.

Then Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming "good news". (1:14) Twice Mark calls it "good news," but he prefaces it by saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent...." (1:15) Repent! Most people would not associate repentance with good news. Repentance suggests remorse, contrition, an apology, which is difficult under the best of circumstances. Someone has said that "most people repent their sins by thanking God they "ain't" so wicked as their neighbours." (Josh Billings) Even if we're driven to it, we would rather confess than repent; we would rather be sorry for our sins and ask for forgiveness than change or reorient our lives, an integral part of the biblical understanding of repentance.

Our walk with God leads us through seasons of contrition and through seasons of blessing, and the season of Lent, if it is allowed to have its full spiritual impact, is our "wilderness," our time of testing, a time to confront our own sinfulness, be it in the classic form of the "seven deadly sins" of pride, anger, lust, gluttony, fear, sloth, and envy, or in other forms—perhaps some home-grown varieties we've developed to augment our flawed human existence.

Humanity has tragic flaws, and if Greek dramas focussed on the fact that no matter how great the hero there was always a flaw in his or her character, Hebrew mythology is no less honest about the human condition. As we learn from Genesis through Revelation, even the greatest of biblical heroes are flawed—Moses, King David, Simon Peter, to name just a few.

## **The Story of Noah**

God may not have intended creation to break down, but it did, and we are left with many pieces that don't fit together. The Scriptures confess that the whole human enterprise broke down rather early, first with the primordial couple in the garden, and many, many times after that. Our Old Testament text tells us the wonderful resolution to the story of Noah, but it leaves out the distasteful details preceding it. Earlier in Genesis we read that "the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was...evil...." (Genesis 6:5) The earth was filled with violence" (6:11 and 13), and God, Genesis tells us, was "grieved...to (the) heart". (6:6) Several times we hear that God was sorry that He had created humankind. (6:6-7)

The Scriptures also tell us that human beings are "earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7, KJV), subject to breakage, like the vessels on the communion table. "We are afflicted in every way," says the Bible, "...perplexed, ...persecuted, ...struck down...." (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

It does not require a liturgical season like the season of Lent to take us into the wilderness—the place where nothing seems to work for us, where life is joyless and barren, the place of broken dreams, broken health, broken relationships and broken lives. And in our spiritual wastelands, we may feel like the psalmist, who wrote, "...my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away ... I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel." (Psalm 31:10, 12)

God may have summed up the human condition when He said, through His prophet, Jeremiah, "...my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." (Jeremiah 2:13)

## **The Rainbow: Sign of God's Covenant with Us**

It was not living water that concerned Noah, but the waters of death, for he and his family would not have survived the great flood but for the grace of God. If the flaws and brokenness of Noah's generation caused God much grief, God also saw that annihilation of His creation was not a helpful resolution of humankind's flawed existence, and so God told Noah, "I am establishing my covenant...with you, that ...never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:9 and 11) And God gave them a sign—a symbol—of the covenant, saying "I have set my (rain)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 (rain)bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature...." (9:13-15) The covenant God makes in these verses is an unconditional covenant, requiring nothing of us; it is also an everlasting covenant (9:16), established once and forever.

The covenant theme will be popping up several times during these Lenten Sundays, but what intrigues me today, as we contemplate blessings and brokenness, and the various images in our texts, is the transformation inherent in the Hebrew word for rainbow, "qesheth," a word which has the original sense of bending. It's an archery term, and has connotations of hunting, battles, and weaponry. The Genesis writer used a symbol of might, and transformed it into a symbol of promise. And if you're feeling fanciful as you

play with the image, you can imagine the rainbow as a bow being pulled toward God, holding his anger at bay and bending it away from the earth. A sign of violence was refashioned into a symbol of everlasting love.

## **Redeeming Broken Lives**

God finds ways to re-frame and redeem human experience. Christians, for example, have taken an instrument of torture, a method for executing condemned criminals, and surrounded it with glory! We might be horrified to see a teenager with a delicate gold electric chair hanging around his or her neck, or an elderly saint keeping her place in her Bible with a bookmark embossed with a hangman's noose, but a cross used for the same purpose holds no such horror. Like the rainbow, the cross—the sign of our redemption—has been remarkably transformed. Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul talks about in Romans when he encourages us to "...be transformed by the renewing of your minds...." (Romans 12:2)

Some of you may remember the old school desks that had inkwells. My own school desks had places to put an inkwell, but we never used them. Years ago there was a man who lived in Scotland who could write and draw beautifully, who was such a talented and creative penman that he was appointed writing master in a village school, and his school used inkwells. His name was Joseph (Joseph Craik), and the children in his class, just learning to write, often left messy inkblots on their pages. While most teachers would chastise the students, circling the inkblots in red and taking away points for sloppy penmanship, Joseph took a different and rather delightful approach. Taking his own pen in hand, and beginning with the blots made by the children, he would add a line here and another one there, and out of the inkblots would emerge pictures of angels!

When the students were given back their assignments, rather than being all marked up with harsh criticisms written in red ink, they were wonderfully decorated with exquisite angelic beings! The children were delighted and pleased, and encouraged!

The Scriptures often assure us that God is present to us in our suffering, and that is a great comfort, but as someone said, "It's not quite enough to know God is just hanging out in the pit of despair with me. I want someone who has gone off to get a ladder!" We cannot presume upon God's ways of carrying out our redemption, but we know that God has the power to transform our inkblots into angels, our blots of transgression into spiritual growth, our spots and wrinkles into a holy sacrifice.

Each of us has our own unique flaws, and the season of Lent, if we let it, brings our flaws into focus. We're all cracked pots, if you will, but if we allow it, God can use even our flaws for the betterment of God's world. In God's holy economy, nothing goes to waste. We have this "treasure in clay jars," said Paul, "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and...not...us." (2 Corinthians 4:-7) Even the greatest biblical heroes were flawed, yet God managed—flaws and all—to use them for His good and righteous purpose. We may be but clay jars—breakable, cracked, even broken—but God can use us to work His purpose out.

That's the lesson for the first Sunday of Lent. It's not whether or not God is with us; God is with us. It's not whether or not God will go to any length to redeem us; God will. Though we may turn away from God, God loves us. In spite of our cracks and flaws and fault-lines, God loves us. The testimony of salvation history, which stretches over millennia, is that the steadfast love of God is far greater than any contrary power. It is in love that God created us, it is because of love that God redeems and transforms us; it is God's amazing love that has the power to sustain us through any spiritual wilderness or temptation. And that is, indeed, good news!

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.