

A Lot Can Happen in Forty Days
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Genesis 6-9 ~ The First Sunday in Lent – February 21, 2021

A lot can happen in forty days. If you don't believe me, ask Noah.

I trust you are familiar with the general outline of the story of Noah - the flood, the ark, and the rainbow. I want to address the character development of the two leading roles in the drama: God and Noah. I am going to suggest that these two are changed by their experience together and their relationship with one another.

When the curtain rises in chapter six of the Book of Genesis, God is angry, grieved, and frustrated. Human beings, just recently created, have been carrying on in ways most violent and displeasing to God. So displeasing, in fact, that God has determined to wipe them all out; indeed, to wipe out every living creature. "The Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord."

Enter Noah, quote: "a righteous man, blameless in his generation, Noah walked with God." Even as God plans for destruction by way of a flood, God instructs Noah how to save himself, his family, and one pair of every kind of creature – by way of an ark. "I will establish my covenant with you," says God.

You know what happens next. It rains: for forty days and forty nights. The waters swell and every living thing is blotted out. Then God remembers Noah. The rains cease, the waters subside. Noah sends first a raven, then a dove, to learn if there is dry land. Noah and all the occupants of the ark venture forth. Noah built an altar and made a burnt offering. "And with the pleasing odor, the Lord said..., 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.'"

"God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'" Creation is given a new beginning. And God placed a bow in the sky: a sign and reminder of the covenant God has made with Noah and every living creature.

While the story book version ends on this upbeat note, the text says more. Noah goes on to plant a vineyard, make wine, get drunk, and fall asleep in his tent, stark naked. Noah's son, Ham, sees his father and tells his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, who cover their father's nakedness. It is not clear just what Noah or Ham did or saw, but it was bad. The story ends with Noah cursing one son, while blessing the two others. A dubious re-start.

The story line progresses from anger and destruction, to a glimmer of hope (in righteous Noah), through annihilation, to a new beginning with a new - and eternal – promise. Then a twist, with human failing ongoing.

A lot can – and did – happen in forty days for Noah. Life as he knew it came to an end. A new life was given. Old land lost, new land found. We hear that he was righteous and obedient. If we allow our imaginations free rein, we can picture terror, grief, hardship, hope, jubilation. At the end, Noah is given new freedom, promise, and power – to bless and to curse. Which, alas, he abuses. One might conclude that it was a bum deal for Noah; he started out blameless and his status in the last analysis is dubious at best. Yet he was the one found by God; he pleased God, was blessed by God, rewarded by God, given the promise of many offspring.

What of God? What changed for God? How did God change? Before we speak to “how” God changed, we might want to question “if” God changed, or changes – ever.... “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever,’ the New Testament reads at Hebrews 13:8; but that one late and questionable verse aside, there is virtually no warrant in the New Testament for any claim that God is immutable, - [unchanging] - and there is equally little in the Hebrew Bible.” “Contradictory as this must seem, [God] enters time and is changed by experience. Were it not so, [God] could not be surprised; and [God] is endlessly and often most unpleasantly surprised. God is constant; [God] is not immutable.” (p.12)

This is what Jack Miles affirms in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, God: A Biography, in which Miles writes “about the life of the Lord God as ... the protagonist of a classic of world literature; namely, the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament.”

With God, as with any literary character, there is more to them than what we read; we imagine their life off stage as well as on. The God we meet in the beginning of the Bible is not the same by the time we get to the last pages. Miles seeks to trace those changes. I’m sure Biblical scholars have taken issue with Miles’ approach, but he contends that, “a self-consciously naïve, start-to-finish approach, besides being more respectful of the integrity of the Bible as a work of literature, has... a surprising drama and pathos about it.” (p.13)

If, for the purposes of our thoughts today any way, we entertain this perspective, God is a puzzling, troubling character. In the immediate aftermath of creation, God (quote), “saw that it was good.” But soon thereafter says of humankind, “I am sorry that I have made them.” God has conflicting motives; God created, yet is angered by God’s own creature; God wants both to nurture and destroy. Somehow, through our text, through the flood, God finds a new resolve. Destruction of humankind does not in fact result in better people; we still do harm. But God chooses, in this text, to stay with us. Never again shall I destroy my creation – even though we continue in evil ways.

God is acknowledging for the first time that this relationship is not one that God can walk away from. God is now in it for the long haul. Until this point, that was not a given. This is also the first time in the relationship that God shows mercy – revealed in the simple “Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.” It made all the difference. By the end, God no longer expects perfection. God expects goodness and holds us accountable, but promises not to destroy us.

Carol Gilligan observes, “What God learns is that terror and destruction don’t change things and that the very evil in the story of Noah that God wanted to eradicate comes back. So God then makes a covenant to stay in relationship with us, and that creates the possibility [both of acceptance and] of change.” (Bill Moyers, Genesis: A Living Conversation, 1996). Through subsequent chapters and books of the Bible we will see this learning blossom and grow, deepening especially as God becomes human in Jesus Christ. Does this open the way to suggest that life with God has less to do with banishing evil, and more to do with integrating the shadow side of our selves?

We are at the beginning of the forty days of Lent. How might the shifting landscape of the relationship between Noah and God serve as the context for our own forty day season of journey – through departure and relinquishment, a journey into the wilderness. How might we listen to God? To let go of life as we know it? To be found by God in our nakedness? To trust the promise of the rainbow?

A lot can happen in forty days. Forty days from now, we and the people with whom we live will have experienced deaths and births, friendships deepened or frayed, entire seasons of self-discovery with crisis and chaos, inspiration, revelation and redemption. In forty days entire governments may be destroyed or rebuilt, landscape-altering discoveries, art created and shared; demons faced, blessings received.

Seeking to make sense of a particularly hard season in his own life, the wise Quaker elder, Parker Palmer, observed, “I understand that to move close to God is to move close to everything that human beings have ever experienced. And that, of course, includes a lot of suffering, as well as a lot of joy.”

My hope and my invitation to you is that you be intentional in your spiritual journeying these next forty days. Noah did not choose his journey, but he entered upon it faithfully. Mark these days in a special way. Undertake some simple act that is, for you, a spiritual discipline, by which I mean any act that focuses our attention on our own spiritual hungers, our relationship with God or God’s creation.

The most natural of spiritual disciplines is prayer; make time to pray. Make time for silence, or a daily walk, or writing in a journal. For some, fasting and abstaining from some seductive food or drink is a good discipline – not for the diet or the sobriety (although these may be a bonus) – but through fasting, to attend to those things for which we truly hunger; that’s why one fasts.

While I hope you will take this invitation to the observance of a holy Lent with seriousness and integrity, a word of advice. Spiritual discipline, to be fruitful, requires gentleness – especially from our staunchest critic who, for many of us, is not God, but ourselves. Be gentle with your self. If you’re undertaking a discipline and slip along the way, don’t abandon your practice, pick yourself up and keep at it.

We may feel that we’re in deep waters. We are not alone. God is with us, is moving closer to us. “I am with you,” God promises - always. What role is God playing? How is God experiencing these forty days with you? Whatever else, our relationship with God is neither static nor set; it is continually unfolding.

Will we be changed through our experience with God in these forty days, and come out in a different place? Will God be changed by God’s experience with us? On this first Sunday in Lent it’s too early to tell, but a lot can happen in forty days – and probably will.