

February 21, 2021
First Lutheran Church
"God Is Still Speaking"
Pastor Joshua Graber

Grace and peace in the name of God our loving Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

On this first Sunday of Lent we remember stories of repentance and hope...of rains that stop, and Jesus baptism in the waters of the Jordan initiating his ministry and kingdom in the land Judea, Israel, and we believe as Christians for all peoples and times.

In preparation for this sermon, I did important research online like watching an old video that was one of the first to go viral on Youtube of a man in Yosemite National Park video taping his reaction to seeing multiple rainbows, "a double rainbow all the way" and then could it be...a triple rainbow. He is so excited he starts crying. And while most assume he had something in his system that enhanced his reaction, I think the excitement over a rainbow's beauty and promise could inspire reactions like that, especially when we think about what it means to us biblically and the promise that ties all creation into the covenant with Noah. Some might say that the rainbow after flood is a story of repentance but not human repentance but God's repentance. Seeing the destruction that comes with the flood God says "never again" and says that this turn from violent reaction to humankind's earthly abuses will never inspire

such a drastic divine response. That context can make us feel a bit uncomfortable, both because of destruction that came and the possibility that God changes God's mind and turns from future behavior can challenge understanding of God's omniscience.

The flood narrative is reported and told in cultures throughout North Africa, Middle East and Asia, which likely means that it is a story widely shared from a specific origin or it was a common event in their cultures and one that was so significant it was told about for generations to come. But in the other versions of the flood narrative, the gods that make sense of the destruction and tell humans why it happened, say that the trauma of human experience in lesser forms are a continuation of this wrath, but when compared to the epic destruction of the flood the hope seems to be that our difficulties can be managed. But in the Jewish Biblical tradition there isn't any continuation of wrath. There is a promise as broad as a rainbow covering our sins and promising that this destruction would not come again.

But our reality remains one that includes traumas small and large. Weather and climate can still wreak havoc on human communities, like we've seen in the south when cold weather and snow hit in a way they are not used to. Human influence on climate and human sin in not preparing properly like we've seen in Texas, both came into play in that situation. And people who have suffered will be checking to see if their insurance companies will claim this as an "act of God" that will let them avoid liability. When something is an

“act of God” in insurance terms, people start praying that the government makes an emergency declaration that will cover the damage. But these terms don’t fit the biblical story we know. While the climate of the world and weather patterns can still create destruction, we do not believe God is taking an active hand in this destruction.

Trauma is a part of the human experience, but God is not directing that trauma or wishing for it on anyone. But this can almost seem like an absent landlord over creation for some people, and in many ways that was the world as people understood it at Jesus’ time.

In those days there was an understanding that God had quit prophesying. He had stopped sending prophets. Many may have felt that if God sent prophets God might be tempted into doing what he did in Noah’s times and so God decided to be distanced from humans and their treatment of each other and their roles as stewards of the planet.

So there hadn’t been a prophet for centuries before John the Baptist came and started baptizing in the River Jordan. The last prophet Malachi said that prophets, specifically Elijah, would return as a marker for the end times, when God’s reign and judgment would come again.

The Jewish people thought the sky had been closed up and that God was silent, but then John showed up, and they wondered was he really a prophet

because that might mean they were in the end-times. The humans in power, kings, religious leaders and empires, must have been on edge, knowing if that were the case, God's judgment and rule would be coming for them and replacing them, perhaps fearing the destruction of Noah on their kingdoms and power, in order to bring God's reign.

John's baptism was a baptism that would probably have been understood as a baptism of repentance to prepare for God to show up, rather than an act of entering into that reign through the baptism. But when Jesus shows up something changes. The reign of God, the end times, the presence and word of God all show up. And the skies that have been closed with no word sent from God for generations, suddenly opens up. The Gospel of Mark tells us ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; ¹² with you I am well pleased."

Just as a dove appeared to Noah with a leaf in its mouth showing hope at the end of the flood. A dove appears at Jesus' baptism, showing God had not deserted his people, and has returned in this hopeful moment announcing Jesus as "my son, the beloved". The witness of Mark then tells us that "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news ¹³ of God, ¹⁴ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; ¹⁵ repent, and believe in the good news."

So in Jesus, you have the full anticipation of God's return lived out in his ministry. There must have been many that said God was not going to come

back... That "God was dead" as the philosopher Nietzsche said more recently. But God was there, and in Jesus, God's time and presence comes to the human world and suddenly everything is in question and turned upside down. Every political and religious party tries to understand who Jesus is...a threat...a godsend...both?

While we don't see Jesus walking in our midst the way they did, we do have signs of God's presence and promises all around us. We just need eyes to see and ears to hear to experience God's reign—God speaking to us and to humanity today. We have good news to share, God's message for the world that Jesus is God's son and that He came to set us free from our sins and the sins of the world. When we proclaim Jesus we are connected to the Holy Spirit and God's presence and our words help to share God's message.

Jesus came with the rainbow of Noah, not to destroy but to fulfill the promises and redeem this world of sin, once and for all. This is God's world. And God's Word is still for us, serving as a light shining in the darkness and bright hope and healing for the trauma the world and our lives continue to experience. Just because God doesn't destroy, does not mean God is weak. Just because we can hold God's word in our hands in a Bible does not mean God is not still speaking. Today we are a part of God's reign, we can be God's voice in the lives of others, a voice that can open up minds, and lives.. and doors to God's way of seeing and loving our world in new ways. God is alive and we are invited to be a part of the life of God every day as Christ's body on earth!

May the peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in
Christ Jesus our Lord!