

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

*From Water to Wilderness*

February 18, 2018 ~ First Sunday in Lent

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### **Introduction to Gospel:**

On this first Sunday in Lent, our scriptures begin with two old, old stories of origin: one very wet and the other goes from very wet to very dry. The wet one you just heard, with God making big promises to soggy Noah after forty days of rain. The story you are about to hear picks up with what happened to Jesus right after his baptism. Keep in mind this is Mark's take, the first and earliest gospel writer. If you are familiar with the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, this account may lack what you are expecting. In Mark, there is no conversation recorded between Satan and Jesus. No Q and A where Satan dares Jesus with various biblical quotes and stunts and Jesus resists, parlaying with solid scriptural rejoinders—that's in Matthew and in Luke. We will take those up another year. In this year of Mark, let's do our best to enter the narrative world of Mark and let Mark's wilderness account do its wild thing on us.

### **Sermon:**

After the week we've had as a nation, I don't think we have to work very hard to relate to the need for a systemic reset, like God promised to Noah after the flood. Our 30 year-old daughter Emily, called us early Friday evening and started the conversation by asking me what I was doing. When I said, "Oh, just sitting down to read the newspaper. She quickly replied, "Oh mom, it's all bad." And she was right. I think we are all asking the same question: again? At Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Lakeland, Florida on Valentine's Day? 17 souls, students and adults, went to their school that day and never came home because they were gunned down by an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle in the hands of a 19-year old, very troubled white man. We shudder and we see those faces and we cry out: how could this happen, again? Now Lakeland is being added to our national lexicon, our grim pantheon of school shootings: Columbine, Sandy Hook, and now Lakeland. Actually there have been so many others: I understand there have been 208 school shootings since Columbine.

Alongside our collective public outcry, finger pointing and politicizing, burns another national lament that has been building over recent months and years: "Will we ever?" Will we ever dig out of, jump forward from, move past, the stalemate, quagmire our Congress has slowly dug itself into as a governing body? And if we can't, what kind of country, what kind of government are we really handing over to the next generation? I wonder if our young DACA recipients in danger of losing their protections here, and the young people across our nation who have experienced first hand the rise in school shootings since 1999, will be the ones who will lead us back onto the path of a more just, more functional way of being a country together. Will they be the angels that minister to us?

Yes, God we are looking for that rainbow in the clouds. We want to trust you, and your covenant to Noah after the Flood. And yes, Jesus: we need to “Repent, and believe in the Good news” individually and collectively. Lent couldn’t come at a better time. These scriptures assigned to the First Sunday in Lent, couldn’t be more relevant to our situation today. I hear in them solid hope based on the reliable truth of God’s covenant, with Noah and with every living creature for all future generations. I also hear a truth about God’s way forward, calling us to take the risk into which Jesus and all of us are baptized, in order to bring the Light of God’s realm into this world. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Let’s back up for a moment. Remember with me, (or all of you millennials and younger, just imagine) the time way before there were smart phones, or Super Mario or Grand Theft Auto, Xbox, or even personal computers, back when I was a teenager. Back then we used to play a game called “Truth or Dare.” Did you ever play that? It’s the one where you sit in a circle at a party and are forced to either tell a truth, some hidden secret you don’t want to tell, or you choose dare and are forced to do something extremely embarrassing. Whichever one you choose, you instantly land in a wilderness where no teen wants to be: by yourself, doing something that makes you look stupid; or revealing some personal secret you haven’t even told your best friend. Exciting and scary.

The thing I remember about playing “Truth or Dare,” sitting cross-legged in a circle on the linoleum floor of my friend’s dimly lit basement, besides wishing my pants weren’t so tight (yes, this was the 70’s) was that I could never decide which was easier: to reveal a truth or take the dare. They both seemed risky for different reasons. What hidden truth about myself would I be brave enough to tell? Or, if I took the dare option, what weird thing would I be forced to do?

Both scripture lessons this morning present us with “Truth or Dare” situations on a cosmic scale. One is after a storm. The other is after a baptism. In our first lesson, after inflicting a 40-day flood that nearly wiped out the earth and all its creatures, God dares to disarm and disable God’s own Divine power. God says I will never again cause a flood to destroy creation. Never again, God promises with no conditions and no caveats. God even hangs up God’s cosmic weapon, a bow (the Hebrew word here is the one that translates as a bow used for hunting and for warfare). Our Bibles tell us, that just after the dawn of creation, God chose against violent, global annihilation as the solution to corruption and sin. God’s promise, God’s first covenant, couldn’t have been more inclusive or comprehensive: all flesh, all creation, for all time. NO matter how bad it gets. We will talk more about that in a bit.

Yes: we hear God self-limiting for the good of all flesh, of all creation: God chose to do it. What kind of a God is that? The kind of God who so loves the world, that God would take another leap along this self-limiting, self-emptying path to becoming

one of us. A poor baby, born in a stable, who grew up to be a man named Jesus. Today, this Jesus baptized and then boom: immediately driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. Not by Satan, but by the Spirit. The Spirit wastes no time: testing starts immediately after his baptism. Yes, Mark tells us that Jesus was “expelled” by the Spirit or “driven by force” as the Greek verb is literally translated into the wilderness: All alone with wild beasts and Satan, the personification of evil, for forty days. God chose to experience first hand the perils of human loneliness, deprivation, and evil.

Much of Jesus’ life and work is far beyond us. But Jesus’ wilderness experience is something we all share with him in one way or another. So, what about us? Lent is a season where we can dare to walk more by faith and less by sight, opening ourselves to whatever startling revelations that God has for us at this particular time in our lives. It is the season for us to reorient our priorities, to reframe, reassess. You might call it the season of “Truth AND Dare.” I will ask you three questions, don’t worry this is not going to turn into a round of “Truth or Dare” right here in our sanctuary—consider these three questions in your head to yourself, or jot down the questions, your first response and take them home to ponder and pray through more thoroughly.

- ❖ **What are your beasts?** Which ones circle you, stalk you, call you on your cell phone wherever you are—or simply debate you as you go about your work in the kitchen, courtroom, classroom, nursery, or office?...
- ❖ **What is your wilderness?** A bothersome place from which you extricate yourself as quickly as possible, that could also be the rootbed of your spiritual growth and life’s calling?...
- ❖ **Who are your angels?** Whose presence enables you to go on when you think you’re at the end of your rope? Whose voice, whose presence or touch ministers to you when there is not a safe tree in sight to climb if you could?...<sup>1</sup> By the way, the Greek verb in the phrase, “and the angels waited on him” is the word we get “Deacon” from. Yes, Deacons, you are our angels!

Lent is the season for anyone who feels absolutely alone in the great storm. Lent is the season for anyone who is scared by the events of this past week or weeks: the violence, the shouting, the judging, the failure of people of faith to find a united voice in the triumph of self-limiting, humble, love and respect for all of God’s creation. Really all.

Did you catch how absolutely comprehensive God’s first covenant in Genesis 9 really was? Perhaps that 40 days storm was a testing period for God, who was fed up with how corrupt the earth had become in such short order, as the story goes. But after the rain came this covenant: The covenant between God and all flesh. As Dr. Wil Gafney, Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas points out, this covenant, “is between God and every girl, woman, boy, man, and intersex person, every lesbian, gay man, bisexual and transgender person, every atheist,

agnostic and religious person, every Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Wiccan and pagan person, every person of ability and perceived limitations, every person of any nationality, ethnicity or racial construction or category, and even includes those who defy and explode categories... this radical inclusivity is part of what makes the religious texts of ancient Israel *scripture* for so many peoples beyond their culture, religion and borders.<sup>i</sup>

There's the truth and the dare: How do we live into this amazing promise like we believe it? How do we disarm ourselves, as God did, hanging God's bow, God's weapon of force and violence, in the clouds for all time. It is surprising how a small change, over time, even over 40 days, can make a big difference in our mindset, and our heart's grounding. I hear Jesus calling us to repent, to turn our minds God-ward this Lent. Jesus saying, "the time is at hand to swing around from kingdoms of your own making." Time to make some good news, to be the good news. Let's get more specific.

Have you thought about fasting this Lent? Fasting is the time-honored tradition of giving up or letting go of bad habits. Try this. OK, maybe it's a dare. Don't worry: I'm not going to suggest that you fast from chocolate or desserts or whatever your guilty pleasure may be. This fast is riskier. It's the one into which we were baptized. I hear Jesus calling us to fast from our fears and our divisions this Lent. Let's dare to fast from our prejudices, from our superiority. We can begin by fasting from criticism. I dare you. And I dare myself: For the good of our shriveled hearts and our wilted souls.<sup>iii</sup>

Wouldn't this be a Jesus way to honor the lives gunned down this week in Florida? This kind of fasting could set the groundwork for conversations that might lead us beyond our polarizing mindsets, and into a place of hearing others with Jesus' ears, as we speak our truth in love and humility. Let's be purple, all Lent. For Christ's sake.

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<sup>i</sup> Gail Anderson Ricciuti, "First Sunday in Lent," *The Abingdon Women's Preaching Annual, Series 3, Year B*, edited by Beverly A. Zink-Sawyer (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2002), p. 56.

<sup>ii</sup> Wil Gafney, Workingpreaching.org.  
[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3567](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3567)

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Rohr, "Friday After Ash Wednesday," *God For Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter*, edited by Greg Pennoyer & Gregory Wolfe, (Paraclete Press: Brewster, MA, 2014) p.28