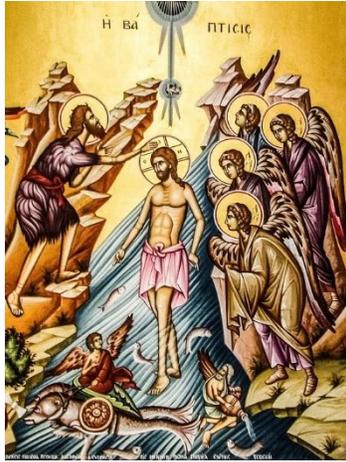


Journeying through the Revised Common Lectionary
Readings, Commentary, and Discussion Questions for February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent



THE READINGS

First Reading: Genesis 9:8-17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Worth Noting: How often do we think of God entering a covenant with “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Genesis 9:13-16 above)? What might it mean that humans are part of the same covenant as (say) racoons and western lowland gorillas?

Psalm 25:1-10

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴ Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸ Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰ All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Worth Noting: The poet first expresses the universal longing for the divine in our lives. And then expresses remorse – and perhaps a touch of fear – over past sins and transgressions (what might be called “youthful rebellion”). Have you ever had the experience of both longing for and fearing God’s presence?

Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Worth Noting: One thoughtful commentator remarks “There is little question that these verses constitute the most difficult passage in the entire letter.” For instance: What does the author mean that “baptism is . . . an appeal to God for a good conscience”? Our commentator thinks the original Greek might mean something like “baptism is a pledge to God to keep aware of sin and justice.” Does that help?

Gospel: Mark 1:9-15

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

CONNECTING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Introduction to Lent and Lenten Scriptures

The season of Lent comes close enough to Christmas that some homes still have Christmas decorations up, brightening the winter nights. Of course, Lent moves the Church from celebrating the Incarnation and its revelation towards Holy Week, Easter, and the Easter sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. While Lent is traditionally thought of as a dreary six weeks, with fasting and mortification, the Sunday Gospels take a different tack: The Lectionary readings focus on Baptism and the new life that it brings. We will hear Jesus speak of his own death and the need for Christians to bear their cross will. But in John’s Gospels, especially in the Gospel in two weeks (March 11) Jesus speaks of his death as his “exaltation.” Rather than a tragedy or a matter of shame, the Gospel of John focuses the reader on Jesus’ raising up, first by the Romans on Calvary, and then by the Father Easter morning. Both, Jesus tells us, are an exaltation.

Baptism enables the Christian to follow this movement from death to life, as Paul proclaims at the Easter Vigil: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” and therefore we too will walk in new life as Christ did (Romans 6:3-11). There at the Vigil when new Christians are formed and all Christians renew their baptismal vows the movement from Christmas and the Incarnation to the instantiation of the Incarnation in the Christian community is complete. The work of the physically present Jesus is complete. The work of enacting the Kingdom of God is passed on to us.

Entering into the Scriptures

Mark’s literary signature is all over the Gospel selection. In Mark’s concise, no nonsense style, we have three distinct actions in the Gospel in just seven verses: Jesus’ baptism, his 40 days in the wilderness, and his initial proclamation. (Following this selection, Mark records the “typical day in the life of Jesus” we heard earlier.) Further, Mark continues to locate Jesus within the prophetic tradition. The Gospel opens with the quotations from Isaiah and Micah concerning his and John the Baptist’s missions (Mark 1:1-3). In verses 10 and 11, the Spirit endorses Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, with the allusion to Psalm 2:7 (“the LORD . . . said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’”). What is to be obeyed are not royal decrees, but prophetic oracles of the fulfillment of God’s plans and the need for repentance (Mark 1:15).

The Missing Years

If Lent is preparation for baptism and renewal of baptismal vows, how should Christians use the season? If we look to Jesus as a model, we note that only after his baptism

did Jesus experience his 40 days in the wilderness. Do we have things backwards?

Jesus' missing years – 15 years or so from his adventure in the Temple to his appearance as a preaching healing prophet – constituted his preparation for baptism and ministry. We have some clues about this time. His father worked wood: We speculate that Jesus too earned a living as a carpenter/woodworker. Jesus and John the Baptist have some connection: Perhaps Jesus spent time with John or a similar sect in the Judean desert. Any such conjecture has some probability; all are speculative; none are sure. What we must realize is that while he spent time in obscurity, Jesus burst on the scene eminently prepared for his mission. He had spent the time well.

Most of our lives echo Jesus' missing years: putting one foot in front of another, quietly caring for each other, experiencing moments filled with love and beauty and pain and faith and doubt. Can it be that living every day well is the best preparation for baptism and ministry?

Questions for Discussion

God's promise not to flood the world again is one side of a covenant between God and the world. What is our side?

Does it make sense to think of baptism as our pledge to God to “stay woke” to sin and justice? Would this be our side of the New Covenant?

How do the traditional Lenten practices of giving to charity, prayer, and fasting prepare us to renew our baptismal vows and to minister to each other and the world? How, in other words, do they enhance our ability to live in love?



Dennis Haugh has enjoyed working with adult seekers for over 20 years. He aims to engage academic and general audiences for the New Testament. To hone his skills and burnish his credentials, he earned his PhD in Biblical Studies in the University of Denver/Illiff School of Theology joint program. He appreciates any correspondence: dennishaugh2011@gmail.com.

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