

Letting Go  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn  
March 1, 2009  
First Sunday in Lent

Scripture:  
Genesis 9:8-17  
1 Peter 3:18-22

We had a great time Wednesday at the first of our ecumenical midweek worship services up the street at St. John's Baptist Church. I'm excited about how the relationships among our neighborhood churches are being rekindled. Judging by the turnout Wednesday, I must not be the only one.

Those of us who organized the series guessed we'd have about 75 worshippers, but about 200 came Wednesday. We ran out of bulletins but, happily, not the soup we had for lunch.

St. John's Baptist Pastor Richard Kremer got a laugh when he pointed out the irony of the situation. Many Baptists, you see, don't recognize Lent in the same way as the "higher-church" denominations. But there we were – Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians – showing up at the Baptist church for the dispensation of ashes on Ash Wednesday.

It did get me to thinking, though, and the very next day one of you e-mailed me a story that captured my wonderings.

It seems a mother looked out the window one day and noticed her Baptist son was 'playing church' with their cat. He was preaching to the cat, which sat quietly in front of him. The mother smiled and went about her work.

A while later she heard loud noises, meowing and hissing. She ran back to the window to see young Johnny baptizing the cat in a tub of water. She called out, "Johnny, stop that! Don't you know - cats don't like water!"

Johnny looked up at her and said, "He should have thought about that before he came to my church."

Well, the Baptists will host our series of mid-day Lenten worship services for six more weeks. I don't know if we are in for a dunking at some point before the series is over ...

but I hope you'll join in, nonetheless. In all seriousness, all of the churches have been great partners and St. John's a gracious host.

Today is, of course, the first Sunday in Lent. Again this year, I find myself thinking about all the different ways we have come to observe Lent in America.

For the most part, we Christians seem to agree on the "what" of Lent – that is, *what* Lent is all about. It is the 40-day period that leads us to, and through the drama of Holy Week and, finally, to the joyous triumph of Easter morning. Across denominational lines, believers see Lent as a time of preparation, of waiting, of renewal and recommitment to the faith and to our baptismal vows. All of that seems to be generally agreed upon.

It's the "how" of Lent that seems to be a matter of interpretation. *How* we change our living seems to be a matter of constant reinterpretation.

Many Christians take the traditional route of giving something up. Perhaps you saw the newspaper story this week that told of how a seven-year old Catholic school student is giving up ice cream and how a group of adults at a Methodist church is giving up alcohol.

One entire school is giving up plastic water bottles to help the environment. One Charlotte woman is giving up her Starbucks coffee and another credit cards. (Perhaps if America had done that a long time ago, we would have avoided some of our current suffering – but that's another story.)

I don't mean to disparage any of this. Fewer drinks, less caffeine, a cleaner environment and less debt are all good things. But my concern is that all this talk about "giving up" obscures the point. It risks becoming a game – to see if we can give up something that is more imaginative or unique, humorous or quirky than the next person. It becomes the stuff of small talk at parties or at work, kind of a visible but non-threatening marker to the world that we are religious people, at least in this way.

But does it all come home? Do we follow through in that quiet time when it is just God and us? The larger idea of Lent, after all, is that, by giving up we gain! We gain the most important thing – a deeper sense of ourselves and deeper understanding of what our God has done for us.

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On first reading, our Old Testament scripture from the lectionary may sound like it has little – if anything – to do with all of this.

It seems like an awfully long way, from Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark came to rest after the flood, to Golgotha, where Christ was hung on the cross. But these chapters that come after the flood cut straight to the very nature of God.

We know the story of the flood, many of us from our earliest memories of children's Sunday school. God and mankind had just started out, really. But in the course of just a few generations, Adam and Eve got kicked out of the Garden of Eden, Cain slew his brother and on it went. God's first reacted by cutting down our years on Earth to no more than 120 or so, but humanity kept up its wicked ways.

Then, as scripture reads, in what is one of the most heart-rending verses of all, "The Lord was sorry he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." As the story goes, the rain started shortly after that and Noah, his family and two animals of every kind rode out the storm that washed the earth clean.

Questions abound, of course, about whether there really was a flood. Biblical scholars believe these verses of Genesis were written by Hebrew priests in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC when Israel was in exile. Scholars also widely embrace the notion that the authors borrowed the basic narrative of a great flood from similar myths and stories of the era.

Whether or not there was ever such a flood is not so much the point, really. But in the lost-ness of their exile, the authors of these verses chose this story to express what they believed about God.

In Babylon, Israel was separated from everything that was familiar, everything that made sense. The world for these authors was upside down, completely reordered. Chaos prevailed and the authors used the great flood to express the depth of that chaos, the possibility that nothing would ever be the same again.

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Perhaps we know just a little of that feeling. It's a feeling we may know if we have lost a child, or soulmate or a devoted parent, someone who had defined our world and our life. Perhaps not in such extremes, but we may know what it feels like to have at least parts of our lives and our world broken down, taken apart and reordered ... if not in our personal relationship perhaps with the economic crisis.

Almost every day's newspaper includes stories speculating about all the ways life in America will be transformed by the crash of 2008.

This month's Atlantic magazine, for example, carries a not-so-cheerful tome about the changes to come in 2009, 2010 and beyond.<sup>1</sup> The article says cities such as Atlanta and Charlotte may come out OK, but the Midwest and other manufacturing-heavy regions may never fully recover. Sun-belt cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas, where the economic highs were higher, are in for a long, slow decline before recovery.

Outlying, over-built suburbs and exurbs will stagnate as housing values languish. Homeownership may never regain its former heights. Society will be more mobile and more rootless as the population shifts in search of jobs and opportunity.

The article concludes with some opinions about how we can make the most of the situation by changing the way we work, the way we live, the way we commute and the way we manage our finances.

"A crisis," says one economist quoted in the article, "is a terrible thing to waste."

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Perhaps, in a cosmic sense, that's what God was thinking in the days after the great flood. A crisis, indeed, is a terrible thing to waste.

It's easy to bring our childhood minds to this story about the flood, to conclude that the story is about humanity getting what it deserved for its evil ways. But it would have been a waste of a good flood if that were all.

The flood story tells us all something far more important. It gives us a clear view into the heart of God.

"I establish my covenant with you," God said to Noah and Noah's sons after the flood, "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.

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: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth ....

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<sup>1</sup> How the Crash Will Reshape America, by Richard Florida. The Atlantic, March 2009

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature.” (vs. 11-13,16-17)

This is the first time in scripture we find the Hebrew word for “covenant,” *beryth*. Six times it appears in these nine verses, as if God is hammering home the point for God’s own sake. “Note to self. Never again. Never again.”

It’s a covenant that requires nothing of Noah or anyone else, only God. A one-sided deal, a pledge that from then on God would make things work out between God and humanity by limiting God’s self. It is God’s first covenant with humanity and it is one of grace.

In this covenant, made even as the waters of the flood are still receding, God says I will abide by you even when, especially when, you try my patience and bring me only suffering and grief.

God knew mankind will not let go of sin. So, God lets go, not of God’s anger or judgment but of a desire to use it in full force against us, even when we deserve it. God gives up part of God’s self and we are the ones who gain.

That, brothers and sisters, is how we get from Mount Ararat to Golgotha. It’s how we get to Lent and how each of us gets to the table that is set before us today, despite our failures, by the grace of God.

Describing this covenant of grace, Frederick Buechner writes:

Like Moses, Jesus believed that if you obey God, God will love you, but here (in raising his wine and saying “This cup is the new covenant in my blood) Jesus is saying something beyond that. He is saying if you don’t obey God, that doesn’t mean that God won’t love you. It means simply that God’s love becomes a suffering love: a love that suffers because it is not reciprocated, a love that suffers because we who are loved suffer and suffer precisely *in* our failure to reciprocate.

By giving us the cup to drink, Jesus is saying that in loving us God “bleeds” for us – not “even though” we don’t give a damn (Buechner writes) but *because* we don’t. God keeps his part of the covenant whether we keep our part or not; it’s just that one way costs him more.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> P. 16 Wishful Thinking. Parentheticals added by me from paragraph in book just before this one quoted.

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Friends, in this first Lent as your pastor, I look forward to walking these forty days with you. I hope you will share your beliefs and ideas about what Lent means to you and how you observe it. I'm sure we can all learn a lot from each other.

In this year when many of us are giving up things in our lives – perhaps not by choice but by necessity in these tight times – I do hope this is a time not only about *giving up* but also *letting go*. Letting go, perhaps, of anxiety or fear or vain pursuit of control. Letting go of guilt or bitterness or an unwillingness to forgive.

In a sense, if nothing else because of our sin, chaos is always with us. On some level, disorder shades our days. But we worship a God who gave up a part of himself to end the storm once and for all, to be closer to us, a God who promises us finally in Jesus Christ that chaos will not prevail. Let us, then, take these 40 days to draw closer to the God who loves us that much.

Amen.