Preaching Notes

Lent 1.B.2015

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

Do you believe in signs? Sometimes I do and more often I don’t. However, the appearance of the rainbow at particular times of trouble and anxiety in my life is one of those signs that I have been forced to believe in. On one of those occasions connected with particular challenges in my pastoral ministry, the full rainbow that lighted up the late afternoon sky was so startling and unusual that it was featured on all the nightly news reports. But for me, seeing it at a time when I had cried out to God – not asking for a sign –but simply needing to claim God’s empowering, liberating presence, was an active representation of the covenant that I had claimed as part of the testimony of my baptism.

Noah had not asked for a sign of God’s presence. Despite ridicule and opposition from his community, Noah had followed God’s command and built the ark. God’s saving act that followed during the days of the flood, Peter argues, was the prefiguration of God’s ultimate act of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At God’s direction Noah came through the waters of the flood to claim new life for all creation. Also at God’s direction, through the water of baptism we can claim new life that has been given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is a clear message that connects these texts. The covenant that we claim that is represented not simply in the colorful rainbow band, but is also reflected in the waters of baptism that proclaims both God’s saving grace and our acceptance of God’s covenantal love.

The everlasting covenant represented in the sign of the rainbow has been superseded by our baptism that is a once-in-a-lifetime sign of our participation in the covenant between God and humanity. Baptism as a sign-act transports us from our sinful state where we are separated from God and gives us new life as we are born anew through Christ. It makes us new persons in Christ and puts us back into right relationship with God. Within that relationship as restored children of God, we reflect the glow of Christ’s light in the same way that the beauty of the rainbow reflects the promise of God to Noah and all creation and reminds us of the glory of God in all the colors of the created world.

We live in a rainbow world. By that I mean that God has given varied color to God’s creation. No group of people on earth is colored in any shade that is represented in the rainbow, and yet there are variations of color within humanity that are representative of God’s palette that shines through all the hues with which humanity is blessed. But regardless of hue, in the same way that the colors of the rainbow are equal in God’s sight, so too all people, made in the image of God, are equal in God’s sight. No one color is of more value than the other. All are living representation of the divine image, thus all are equal in the sight of God. Further, every person stands similarly in need of the grace of God that is present in baptism, and through our baptism we are all equally made new persons in Christ and restored equally to oneness with God.

That human beings should demean or devalue one group or give greater value or care to another simply because of their hue is simply a sign of the sinfulness of humanity. Baptism, the sign of our acceptance of God’s covenant should also be a sign of our total acceptance of and agreement to live in God’s covenant. And the message of the preacher on this first Sunday of Lent should be a witness to that reality, not only in the proclamation but also in the life of the preacher.

To our shame, the Christian Church has been as guilty as the wider society in creating a hierarchy of color and discriminating against those who they consider on the lower end of the scale because of their darker hue. In that, they have broken the covenant that they made at their baptism and Lent calls the church to repentance for this blatant evidence of their continued sinfulness It is a message that must be proclaimed again in February as we celebrate Black History Month, during these forty days of Lent, and throughout the year.

Mark 1:9-15

Mark does not give specifics about Jesus’ time in the wilderness and I consider it a good thing. At times we are so caught up with the details offered by Matthew and Luke that we neglect the many other areas of our lives that are subject to temptation and the way in which we succumb to those temptations. There are several areas within this text that I consider important foci for preaching- through not all at once.

First Jesus is at a high point in his life. He has been baptized by John and his identity as Son of God has been proclaimed. And before he can wallow in the moment, he is transported into an area of testing. Too often that is the situation in our lives. Referring back to a situation I named earlier this month, as (United Methodist) pastors under appointment, we may be sent to a new pastorate each year. And just when we are beginning to feel affirmed for the ministry that we did previously, we experience the wilderness of a new congregation that refuses to accept or at best challenges our pastoral leadership continually. Beyond the exigencies of pastoral ministry, congregation members are also in situations of newness such as a new job, new school, new classmates, new family, and just as they prepare to celebrate what they consider a moment of joy, along comes a challenge that does not only dilute or dissipate the joy but multiplies the challenge through the temptations offered by seductive powers of might that are contrary to right. That is a message that all need to hear – both pastor and people.

Secondly in the midst of temptation we are beset on every side by attack that seems to come from ravening wolves seeking to tear us apart. But that is never the whole story. In every situation there are those, sometimes one who takes on an angelic role of support and encouragement. The text reminds us that in the midst of his temptation in the wilderness “angels waited on him.” Another biblical translation says they ministered to him. That is a preachable message because it represents a word of assurance, a message of grace that speaks of God’s presence in the midst of every struggle for the right. God is on the side of the oppressed and in the midst of every fight for righteousness and justice, whether we engage it as individuals or a community. God enters into our wilderness situations where temptation lurks, and empowers us to overcome and be victorious through the grace of Christ.

Additionally, when we allow God’s ministering spirit to speak life and light into our wilderness situation, God always fills us with a gospel message that becomes encouragement for both preacher and people. It is a testimonial of God’s empowering grace. And just as the preacher gets that affirming word, the preacher is called in the name of Christ to bring that word to the people of God. Many in the congregation are living in wilderness situations due to myriad causes. In this last week of February, the many representations of African American contributors publicized in the media, are coming to an end, but the challenge to this community continues apace.

Likewise others within and outside the congregation are tempted by issues at work, in the home, in their spiritual lives and in all areas of their natural life. The message of Christ’s claiming love for each and every one of us is timeless and must be preached consistently and continuously. In the same way the gospel message that calls the baptized to kingdom living is also necessary to the church. Above all as preachers, charged with the proclamation of the gospel, on each occasion of preaching, the good news is that through Christ the kingdom of God has come near with a promise of transformation for all believers. And beyond that, there is a message of discipleship that is foundational to every sermon. “Believe in the good news.”