Lent 1

February 21, 2021

Genesis 9:8-17

In the musical “Chicago,” there’s a wonderful song called “When You’re Good to Mama.” If you’ve seen the movie version, it’s sung by Queen Latifah, who plays Mama Morton, the matron of the prison. She sings, “There’s a lot of favors I’m prepared to do. You do one for Mama, she’ll do one for you.”

The song highlights how a system of reciprocity ruled the prison. The matron is often seen receiving gifts from various prisoners, who in turn receive special favor in the form of better food or relaxed rules.

It gave the matron the illusion of being benevolent. But, in reality, the only prisoners who received perks were those who could afford to bribe the matron. That worked only as long as they could afford to keep her attention.

Because it was an inherently unjust system, there were always prisoners who had no chance of being able to afford any perks, any special favor. And those who had favor could lose it on a moment’s notice.

Often, that’s how power works. Those who have it can choose to appear benevolent when entering into agreements with others. But for those who have no power, there’s always the chance that the person in power will change their mind, and decide to no longer honor the agreement.

Such systems are clearly not in keeping with biblical teachings, clearly not how God would have us act toward our neighbor.

We have in our Genesis text for today the first of the covenants God makes with humanity.

In biblical times, covenants were legal agreements, forming a relationship of mutual obligation, typically between someone with great power and someone with little or no power. A conquering nation might promise to not destroy the people they have just defeated, but only if the losing nation met certain obligations, which were usually designed to crush their spirits. You do something for me, I’ll do something for you.

The conquering nation had the luxury of negotiating from a position of power. Perhaps they didn’t want to be involved in a prolonged battle, but ultimately, the defeated people had a lot more to lose.

But in the covenant we hear about today, that’s not at all how things work.

With a heart full of regret and sorrow and pain, caused by the violence in the hearts of humanity, God sent destruction: a flood over the whole earth, sparing only Noah and his family and two of each animal. After 40 days and 40 nights of rain, the waters began to recede, the sun came out, and a rainbow formed amidst the clouds.

God clearly had all the power in the relationship. God could have chosen to create a list of requirements for Noah and his family, could have placed steep conditions in exchange for refraining from destroying creation again.

But God didn’t. Instead, God committed to humanity and to all of creation. Even though the nature of humanity didn’t change, even though the flood didn’t cleanse human hearts from sin, God chose to enter into a covenant, not just with humanity, but with all of creation, and voluntarily chose to limit the ways God would exercise power going forward.

It’s important for us to notice that the covenant requires much of God and asks nothing in return. There’s no “I’ll do this if you’ll do that.” There is no list of laws, no recitation of expectations. Instead, God says, “I’m not ever going to do that again. I’m never going to send a flood and wipe out my creation again. And as a reminder, I will set my bow among the clouds.”

And that reminder? It’s not for us. ***It’s for God.***

God says, “When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ***I*** 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."

God asks nothing in return. God hangs up his metaphorical bow, signaling an intent to refrain from violence. And then God takes the typical covenant relationship and tosses it right out the window. Instead of saying, “OK, you’ve seen what I can do. You can play by my rules, or you can risk destruction again,” God declares an end to acting with violence, acting out of anger or frustration with humanity’s sinfulness.

God imposes limits only on His own behavior, and does so *knowing* that humanity is still sinful, *knowing* that God’s suffering and sorrow will continue.

But God chose this path, rather than wiping out all humanity and replacing them with beings incapable of sin.

Instead, God chose a path that led to God the Son enduring death on the cross, all in the hopes of redeeming all of creation, because of God’s endless love.

Because as much as God values justice, as much as God insists we act with justice toward our neighbor, God values mercy even more.

And so God did not wash the sin out of the world through destruction. Instead, God washes the sin out of ***us*** in our baptisms.

In the waters of baptism, God washes away our sin, puts to death our old, sinful selves, and gives birth to a new creation, our new being. Our sin is serious and worthy of justice, but God’s creative love is stronger. God’s mercy is stronger.

During this season of Lent, we are reminded of our sin, our failure to act with justice toward our neighbor, and our need for repentance. As tempting as it is to focus more on God’s mercy and love, we must think about the grief and sorrow our sin causes for God. We must remember that God chose to take suffering into God’s own heart and bear it there for the sake of the world.

Not so God could keep score, not so God could better judge us, but because God loves us extravagantly and unendingly.

God will do whatever it takes to bring wholeness to all people and to all of creation. God’s desire to be in relationship with humanity always wins. In spite of the violence and hardness in our hearts, in spite of our wanderings and our giving in to temptations, God has found something in us that is worth redeeming.

In the covenant of baptism, God promises that the last word will not be our sin, but rather God the Creator’s unending, unconditional love for us. There is nothing we can do to cause God to withdraw from that covenant or take God’s love away from us.

God is not about reciprocity. God is all about love, and there is no force in the universe that is more powerful than God’s love.

Thanks be to God.