

Divergence on the Lectionary - First Sunday in Lent, Year B

First Reading

Genesis 9:8–17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God 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: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 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. When 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.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Peter 3:18–22

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 1:9–15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

God's covenant with humanity, received through Noah, (the first use of the word *berit*, or covenant, in the Bible) marks the beginning of the Sundays in Lent for Year B. It has a tenuous relationship to the Gospel text for 1 Lent in that it rained on Noah and his family and the ark for 40 days, the same period of time that Jesus spent in the wilderness. But those 40 days aren't mentioned in our reading. Instead we have the "bow in the clouds" that God gives as a reminder of Their covenant with humankind, a promise never to repeat the flood. But it also is loosely connected to our other text, which mentions Jesus' baptism. Peter cites the flood as a prefiguring of baptism, which Jesus also undergoes, so there's a loose sort of thread there.

It seems awfully likely that the Flood was in fact an historical event. Almost every ancient culture had some story of it. Each society struggled to make meaning out of what must have been an extraordinary catastrophe. The story as we have it in Genesis today is the product of two of the ancient authors/redactors that composed most of the Torah. The older story comes to us from the Yahwist (J) and the newer material from the Priestly source (P). Our entire reading for this week comes from P. You'll recall from other discussions that P is the latest of all the sources, both editing the material received and adding its own. It comes to us from post-Exilic Judaism.

So the blessing we read this week was added on to the covenant established at the end of chapter eight. I'll cite those verses for you here.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the

LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” (Genesis 8:20–22, ESV)

You can see how this would have been a perfectly adequate ending to the Noah saga, but the P source felt it necessary to add the bow in the clouds as an additional sign. This seems to be because P wanted to create a “frame” for what is sometimes called the “primeval history” in the Pentateuch. Chapters 1 and 9 of Genesis create this frame in which the author illustrates that what was once good (Creation) is gone thanks to human sin, but that God has decided to be gracious to humanity in spite of that fact that “the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth (from the extra verses I cited above). The covenant we read this week goes beyond the promise of chapter 8, and establishes another pattern, that of a visible sign of covenant, which will return in next week’s reading from Genesis 17.

It is worth noting that, while we view the rainbow as a sign of God’s love for us in all our variety, it is likely that this was not the meaning it carried for its first readers. The “bow in the clouds” (for Hebrew has no word for rainbow) was likely understood to be a war bow. God’s war bow. Yes, it is still a sign of God’s covenant never to repeat the Flood, but this is a warrior’s sign. Some commentators point to the fact that the bow in the clouds points up towards heaven, not down at us. Does this change how you read this passage?

Second Reading

I learned a good deal this week, studying this portion of 1 Peter. I learned that most scholars now view the entire letter as a baptismal tract, perhaps something read as part of a baptismal liturgy. I also learned that the translation of several bits that we find in our reading this week are actually pretty difficult to translate, let alone understand.

Given the baptismal function of this text then, I find it really exciting to think that when Peter says, “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you,” the word “now” really stands out. It may still be a reference to the way that baptism functions in this age, but there is a new immediacy in it as the reader stands before those who are about to be baptized *now*.

I also learned that the word translated as “conscience” (*syneidesis*) in our text bears little resemblance to our notion of conscience in the modern day. In its most literal translation it would be knowledge shared with another. It is a shared awareness. And

the “appeal to God” that follows is also a difficult translation. The word translated “appeal” (*eperotema*) really means more a declaration or decisions. So that part of our text for this week might better read, “Baptism, which is prefigured by this (the Flood), now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an declaration toward/decision for God through a good awareness resulting from the resurrection of Jesus Christ...” Something like that.

This fits so much better into the baptismal setting for which 1 Peter was composed, a moment where the one to be baptized makes a decision for God because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it takes some of the head scratching out of the text as well.

Gospel Text

Once Mark has established the prophetic credentials of John the Baptist (though he misquotes Micah as from Isaiah) as well as the popularity of his message (everyone goes out to hear him) he jumps immediately (dad joke intended) to Jesus’ appearance for baptism. At the moment of His baptism Mark tells us that the heavens are “torn.” “Open” is an interesting addition by our translators. If you hear from the NRSV on Sunday it will say “torn apart,” but really, it just says “torn.” It is still a violent word, “*schizo*” from which we get our word “schism,” but I don’t think it needs the addition of “open” or “apart.”

The tearing of the heavens is accompanied by God’s declaration, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Commentators on Mark have long noted that the “tearing” of the heavens at the beginning of the Gospel is echoed by the “tearing” of the Temple curtain at the conclusion. Not many in my recollection have also noted that God’s declaration is also repeated by the centurion at the end, “Truly, this was God’s Son.” (It is also worth noting that the curtain that is torn in Mark 15 was deep purple and embroidered with cherubim, symbolizing the heavens.)

Then we get to the portion of our reading that is central to every Gospel text for the First Sunday in Lent. Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested for forty days. Except that’s all we get. Matthew and Luke give us much more information about the time of testing and Jesus’ temptations. For Mark it is enough that Jesus was tested. And it is important that we read this verb as “test” rather than “tempt” because Mark intended us to make another connection with the end of his Gospel, when Jesus is “tested” by the Pharisees and Herodians with the question about taxes paid to Caesar in chapter 12 (same verb, *peirazo*).

One of the characteristics of Mark's Gospel is that most of Jesus' opposition comes from supernatural sources in the first half (Satan, the demonic) while in the second half the role of opponent is taken up by human agents (Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians). Satan tests Him in the beginning, the authorities do at the end. Did Mark intend us to see them as agents (perhaps unwitting, to give them some grace) of Satan? Personally, I don't think that conclusion can be avoided.

These are but a few examples of the way that reading Mark as a whole helps give meaning to the individual parts. So many portions (but not all, of course) of Mark's Gospel have corresponding sections in the other half of the Gospel, and we're meant to read them against one another.