

Sermon - in the wilderness

Based on Genesis 9.8-17, 1 Peter 3.18-22 and Mark 1.9-15 (NRSV)

Using other Scriptures with Mark

- In other years in the Church's three-year cycle of readings, we are presented with Matthew and Luke's more detailed accounts of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.
- Mark, on the other hand, gives very little away:
He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1.13)
- That's it - that's all.
- So we ourselves are tempted to add the details of the specific aspects of temptation that Matthew and Luke provide.
- However, while Matthew and Luke present gospel accounts that are similar to Mark's, and while all the gospel writers, including John, are fundamentally telling the Good News of Jesus Christ, they each have a different focus, and a different emphasis.
- So if we conflate similar accounts, we then lose the distinctive voice of each Gospel writer.

Rebooting with Noah

- This does not mean that we cannot refer to other Scripture passages to help us engage more deeply with any particular reading.
- Indeed, our Old Testament and Epistle readings today help us to do just that.
- So let's go to the reading from Genesis, which describes God establishing a covenant with Noah and his family - and indeed, with all life on earth.
- I will remind you briefly of the story before the conclusion we've heard.
The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. (Genesis 6.5)
- I am reminded of a computer that has got stuck in itself and isn't functioning, and as a last resort one can switch it off and on again - maybe using a so-called reboot button.
- I can imagine a cartoon of God looking at the world, and thinking, 'Hmm, it's stopped working in the way I designed it to work. I'll have to reboot it.'
- But even when rebooting a computer, there needs to be a bit of start-up programming code that runs, and then everything else sequentially gets going again.
- In the case of the Genesis story, the start-up code was Noah.
- Noah had some kind of faith relationship with God - deep enough to understand that he was meant to construct an ark.
- Noah boarded the ark with his family and enough livestock, and made it safely through the flood.
- Once the flood was over, and the land had been cleansed from those that denied their relationship with the creator, Noah and his family then restarted the human race.
- And God establishes a covenant to reassure them that the world will always be safe from this experience again - that life will always continue.
- The rainbow becomes a wonderful symbol of that reassurance.
- It is a fitting symbol, because we only see rainbows when sunlight is shining through falling rain - and we know that rain and light encourage new life to grow.

Through the waters of destruction

- Now in Peter's first letter he reckons that the flood that Noah experienced *prefigured* baptism.
- Baptism, Peter says, is not primarily about representing the '*removal of dirt from the body*' (1 Peter 3.21), but about representing the action of being saved from the destructive power of water.

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- It might help if I clarified two ways that water was understood symbolically in the Bible.
- One way is as a source of life - a spring welling up in a desert, and flowing as a stream or river, such as that described in Revelation as 'the river of the water of life', and the living water that Jesus offers the Samaritan woman at the well.
- The other way is as a representation of chaos and disorder - such as the sea or a flood, or the Sea of Galilee during a storm, or even as a life-threatening barrier that cannot be passed without divine intervention, such as the Red Sea when the Israelite slaves escaped the Egyptians, or the Jordan River that needed to be made to temporarily stop flowing so that the Israelites could enter into the Promised Land.
- So Peter highlights that the baptism that we undergo as Christians is not a baptism *in* the living water, but a baptism *through* a chaotic and destructive flood.
- Peter refers to Noah, who is described in Genesis as '*a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.*' (Genesis 6.9)
- This description comes from before the flood, and provides a significant description of Noah that Peter presumes that those reading his letter would know: it is that '*Noah walked with God.*'
- Just like Adam and Eve walked with God before they put their own desires first and so damaged their relationship with the Lord God, this description of Noah walking with God indicates an intimate relationship between God and Noah.
- So when Peter writes that '*baptism ... now saves you ... as an appeal to God for a good conscience*', he is thinking that Noah was saved through the flood, in the ark, as a result of Noah being in a faith relationship with God.
- And similarly our own baptism experience would enact the same saving from chaos and disorder, because we were made righteous by establishing a personal faith relationship with God, just like Noah.

Jesus transitions from carpenter to Christ

- All of this then enriches our comprehension of today's Gospel reading, which very briefly describes Jesus' baptism, temptation, and the start of his ministry.
- Jesus likewise is immersed in the waters of the Jordan - a symbolically dangerous barrier between one stage of life and the next.
- And he comes through these symbolic waters of death because of his personal faith relationship with God.
- God himself directly affirms this for Jesus: '*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*'
- In addition to expressing his pleasure in Jesus being in such an intimate relationship with him, I think that God is also saying that he is pleased with Jesus for taking this life-changing step.
- At his baptism, Jesus is transitioning from being an unknown carpenter in a rural backwater, to being the Christ, the one anointed by God to open the way for all people to return to right relationship with God.
- However, the transition isn't completed at his baptism.
- God's Spirit compels him to go off on his own, out into the wilderness, beyond the comfort and security of human habitation.
- Mark describes Jesus as being '*with the wild beasts*', which gives us a sense that he was vulnerable to lions, bears and snakes.
- Jesus was in a place isolated from the comfort, friendship, and support of other people.
- And there he was tempted.
- Actually, the Greek word *peirazein* means either 'tempted' or 'tested'.

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- In Matthew and Luke's accounts it is more accurately translated as 'tempted', but here in Mark's account 'tested' would be a better translation.
- Jesus' comprehension of what he is being called to be and do was being tested, and tempered, so that by the time the forty days were over he could then return from the wilderness and start proclaiming the good news of God with confidence and a surety of who he was, and what his God-given purpose was.
- I remind you that forty days does not necessarily mean exactly forty days by the calendar.
- Time periods of forty days, weeks, months and years in the Bible are rather understood as meaning 'until the time was accomplished'.
- In the case of Jesus in the wilderness, it would have signified 'until his time of testing was complete'.
- The last point to make is that during this time of vulnerable isolation and testing, *'the angels waited on him'*.
- Although Jesus was far from human comfort and help, he was still being given divine care and support.
- I would suggest that it was only as a consequence of his intimate relationship with God that he was able to recognise and draw on the angelic support given.

Comparing flood and wilderness with pandemic

- Before I end, I'd like to make a comparison between this time of Jesus' testing, and the time that each of us has been facing, and might still be facing, during the covid pandemic.
- I would suggest that for many of us, our experience of normal life has become disordered and even chaotic.
- The disorder of the flood that Noah experienced might be symbolic of the disorder thrust upon our own lives.
- The danger of destructive waters might be symbolic of the danger of the pandemic virus itself.
- I wouldn't say that we have chosen to enter into this situation, or that God's Spirit has compelled us into these circumstances.
- But there are parallels in that many of us have, and for some of us still are, experiencing isolation from comfort, friendship and support - such as Noah and his family experienced when cut off from the world in the ark, and such as Jesus experienced when alone in the wilderness.
- Noah and Jesus were vulnerable in these situations, and I know that there are parishioners who have been feeling vulnerable for almost a year now.
- What I encourage us to focus on is what Noah was known for - as being someone who 'walked with God'.
- I encourage each of us to step closer to God, as his Son Jesus did, and be alert to how God might be offering us divine care and support through his angels.
- I encourage us to engage with this time as a time of testing - of having our relationship with God tested.
- Do we turn to God in our need?
- Do we ask the Spirit to protect us?
- Do we pray to Jesus in our own distress, and do we ask God to bless others with his blessing of peace and well-being?
- Maybe we can still engage with these times as an opportunity to learn to walk more closely with God, and then find ourselves more certain and confident in our faith relationship with God as a result.
- I pray that we each may be inspired by these words of Scripture, by God's covenant with all life, by Peter's commentary, and above all by the actions and decisions of our Lord himself, who shows us the way to be in close relationship with God.