Sunday, 2/21/21

**1 Peter 3:18-22**

18For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God fora good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

**Sermon**

The first sermon of Lent season always feels high-pressure. It’s the buildup to Easter season, which is joyful, but we have to get through the darkness of Holy Week first, and before that we have Lent, which asks us to be reflective: if the Resurrected Savior is so important then we have to ask ourselves what we need saving from. Most people are aware on some level of sin, even if we don’t want to talk about it. In normal years we approach Lent by giving something up. Usually it’s a small pleasure like chocolate or caffeine: something we enjoy that does us no great harm. Even if we don’t like to talk about sin, giving up something we enjoy suggests that on some level we’re aware that there’s something in our lives that shouldn’t be, or that we deserve to be deprived of something. The ritual of giving up something you enjoy suggests a guilty conscience and small nod towards contrition. Not that giving up some small pleasure ever could fix what’s wrong with the world—something bigger than not eating chocolate for a month and a half every year is required (even assuming we would stick to it, rather than drop it like a New Year’s resolution).

I’ve struggled many years to find something meaningful in Lent. Daily life has often crowded out my intentions of being penitent or reflective. We’re only a few days into Lent this year, but it feels different. It seems like we need Lent more desperately than ever, and the small token sacrifices won’t improve things (and also with everything going on I really need the coffee). Last year Lent and a pandemic began at the same time, and I remember preaching that God was still present, and God’s presence meant that the church would continue to exist even when it doesn’t meet physically. Nearly one year later the pandemic is still hanging on, and fear has turned into fatigue. Racism and inequality have been on our radar, unemployment is up, politics are worse than ever, and the environment is a mess. There’s a lot wrong in the world, and in our own lives. The anxiety and uncertainty are hard to live with. It’s easy to tell that there’s something wrong in the world.

Lent begins with God’s covenant with Noah and with this strange passage from 1 Peter. There’s enough here for a doctoral thesis: who are the “spirits in prison who in former times did not obey” that Jesus preached to? That’s too much to unpack for one sermon, and it probably wouldn’t be very uplifting. A word of hope is needed now, and it’s there if you look for it. The author talks about Noah and the flood prefiguring baptism. Presumably you’re all familiar with the story of Noah and the flood: humanity finally became so evil that God got fed up and decided to wipe out all the life on the surface of the planet in a flood. So far not very hopeful. If God could wipe humanity off the face of the earth once, maybe God will do it again. People have been saying for a few decades now that the time is coming. But our passages today don’t focus on that. Peter tells us that, even as God flooded the earth in judgment, eight people were saved through water. The flood, in this telling, didn’t destroy humanity: it washed away our evil. Genesis reminds us that God judges evil but protects life, making a covenant with Noah and his family never to flood the earth in judgment again.

Here the passage gets even more obscure. The water of the flood prefigures the water of baptism, which saves us. Christians have always loved baptism, even if we disagree over how and when it should be done. Some people get immersed in rivers or pools as adults, others get splashed with water from a font as children. Baptism is generally scene as a sign of God’s washing away of our sins and an act of the one being baptized accepting Christ as his savior, and a commitment on the part of the church to remember that they, too, belong to Christ, and to welcome the one being baptized into the church family. Peter calls baptism “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” Not that we have a good conscience already: baptism is an acknowledgment that our consciences aren’t clean, and an appeal to God for the grace to not hold our sins against us. The flood in Genesis was an expression of God’s anger over human evil, and it wiped out a huge part of the population, but even in his anger God saved Noah and his family. Genesis also shows God making a covenant with Noah that God is committed to preserving, not destroying, this world that God made. Baptism reminds us that God has made this commitment to saving us from our own evil and redeeming us despite our resistance.

Life keeps reminding us how badly we need this grace. This week natural disasters and failures of leadership connected to them have been added to our list of this to cry out to God about, and we hope desperately that God is listening.

* 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God fora good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.
* All of creation is subject to Christ: including nature, governments, our own sin
* We’re forgiven: Jesus’s death and resurrection save us

This description of baptism speaks directly to the penitence of Lent. We come to this season realizing how much evil there is in the world and how many ways we’ve each fallen short. We try to make penance every year with a small sacrifice, hoping it will keep us from being smitten along with the rest.

* His death and resurrection are enough to cover all the sin & evil ever committed
* Grace is always available to us
* The sacrifices we try to make are insufficient, also unnecessary
* Better sacrifice: refrain from harsh words, etc.