



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 9TH PENTECOST
MARK 6:45-56 & GENESIS 9:8-17
JULY 25, 2021
“LET’S GO BOATING”

It’s summer - how appropriate then that our lessons in Genesis and Mark are boating stories? Except that in both the water is anything but friendly – in fact water in these stories is the sort that any sensible boater would stay away from. They’re menacing. Lutheran sensibilities thus suggest we avoid this choppy water altogether and head straight to the calm water that saves us – baptism. Baptism is in view one way or another in a lot of scripture, but our stories today don’t afford us the luxury of heading straight to it – without first seeing why something like baptism and the faith that receives it have testy waters to navigate first.

Both lessons stress that faith must have an object – a destination if you will, for our purposes a person, if that faith is to do what faith does...rescue from sin and give assurance of salvation. What is it that faith must look to lest it become little more than self-confidence? The first is expressed by the word covenant. That’s not a frequently used word – agreement, contract, treaty, promise, they all would get chosen way ahead of covenant if you were asked to describe a relationship. But Christianity inherited from our Old Testament Jewish roots this important idea – people of faith have hope, we await a grand crescendo to life because God is committed to us through his covenants.

There are in the Old Testament five major covenants – all of which to one degree or another “prefigure” the covenant of baptism. These are the Covenant with Abram and Sarai in Genesis 12 (*I will make of you a great nation*), the Covenant of Circumcision in Genesis 17 (*the external, everlasting sign of that previous covenant*), the Covenant with Moses in Exodus 20 (the Ten Commandments), and the Covenant with David in II Samuel 7 (*I will establish a descendant of yours on the throne of Israel forever*). Some would say a sixth was Jeremiah 31, when God said of his covenant people of the future “*I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts.*”

The first Old Testament covenant however is Genesis 9 – and it’s made with the whole human race. “*I establish my covenant with you and every living creature with you...never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood...I will set my rainbow in the clouds...and whenever I see it, I will remember...*” This is a most extraordinary thing. “Gods” both ancient and modern largely make demands. If they promise anything, it’s conditional or temporary (as in the gods of consumption or pleasure or beauty or power) and gods of that ilk always arrange things to their advantage – they bind folks to perform but never binds themselves – “*I beg your pardon...I never promised YOU an rose garden!*”

In Genesis 9, however, God binds himself to “never again” do something – in this case harm his creation because of its sin. In the aftermath of the flood we are told nothing changed about human behavior – a few sinners were saved in a boat and before long hopped ashore and re-populated the earth with more sinners. What changed in the Covenant with Noah...was God! Walter Brueggemann, a professor of Old Testament at Emory University, said “*God (had) made a decision about the grief and trouble of his own heart.*”

Never again...! Never again will humans have cause to say the evil of this world or their own suffering is rooted in God's anger. Both still grieve the heart of God – but God has found another way to contend with it. No more water...at least not the consuming kind. God has given his word – a word that in our Lutheran tradition we believe comes to us as Law (or judgement) and Gospel (or grace) – but always there for the sake of creating and strengthening faith. II Timothy 3:16 says, *“all scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”* All of it is good for us – every word of it – the judgement of our sin and the forgiveness of it for Jesus' sake, for of what need of the latter have we if we're not sinking by the minute under the former? True?

The Covenants are the object of our faith – the safe harbor of grace. So, faith is not wishful thinking – a hunch that God will look the other way on our worst days or give us the benefit of the doubt on our dying day. Faith that saves and calms believes nothing else but that God is neither duped by our sin nor is his goodness in the least blown off course by our badness. In our story from Mark, earnest but weakening boaters, presented to us *“straining at the oars, because the wind and the waves were against them”*, come, after much exertion and no little worry, to realize this. By themselves they were getting nowhere.

The commands of God are good – given for our well-being as Paul says. But they are also to be sure a prevailing wind, we keep them if at all by *“straining at the oars”* – trying harder...rowing faster...digging deeper within a presumed reservoir of self-will – I got this...I'm catching up...I'm nearly there. It's no coincidence Mark tells us Jesus was content to *“pass such disciples by”* – *‘you got this boys - then I'll see you on the other side’!* Faith in oneself needs no Savior. It's safe to say, that while faith is always concerned with what lies ahead – and Christianity is above all a belief that the best yet to come, faith's first task is to remember.

And what it must remember above all else is that God remembers. God remembers the day he set a bow in the sky, as though a warrior making terms of peace. So the world has its rainbow, and God will work out how the appearance of it and his awakened memory from it will reckon even that part of his creation that sees in faith no great virtue - at times little more than superstitious silliness. But you dear Christian do not live only under that sign of God's mercy - you have a cross upon which Jesus defined mercy. From which he remembered you. Faith contrary to popular opinion does not believe just anything – faith believes in fact in but one thing – the goodness of a God who never forgets those he loves...starting with you. AMEN