

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday in Lent – Year B

**RCL Readings** – Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

**ACNA Readings** – Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25[:3-9]; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-13

**Seasonal Introduction.** Ash Wednesday marked the end of Epiphany and the beginning of the season of Lent. Traditionally, Lent is a season of 6 weeks of preparation bringing us to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>1 2</sup> The early church felt that the celebration of the resurrection was something believers should diligently prepare for. Lent is a time of intention to deliberately walk deeper with the Lord in spiritual discipline involving prayer, acts of charity and fasting.

Fasting is a practice that has fallen out of favour in many sections of the Church but fasting was a regular discipline in the spiritual life of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Intriguingly, Jesus does not say, "If you fast", rather, in Matthew 6:16, He says, "When you fast" implying He is expecting His disciples to actually continue the practice as part of their faith walk.

**Common Theme.** Usually the Scripture readings during Lent lend themselves to the themes of penitence and self denial. Historically, the early church used the season as a preparation for those who were to be baptized (called catechumens) during the Easter Vigil, marking the time as a momentous passage from darkness to light, from death to life.<sup>4 5</sup> The first Sunday in Lent always includes the temptation in the wilderness of Jesus. The temptation begins the cosmic battle between God and the Enemy, setting the stage for the Passion of Jesus and the triumph

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<sup>1</sup> The practice of communal fasting leading up to the Great Easter Vigil and Easter was common, as new believers (who had sometimes studied for a year or more in preparation) prepared themselves for baptism during Easter and their new communities joined them in the final days of preparation through fasting.

<sup>2</sup> While the early church did not immediately practice fasting for forty days before Easter, the practice of a forty day fast had fully developed by the 4th century. This came out of the examples in Scripture, most prominently Jesus' forty days in the wilderness as He approached His time of ministry. Moses' forty days on Mount Sinai and Elijah's journey to Mount Sinai are two additional forty day fasts.

<sup>3</sup> According to the earliest non-testament biblical document called the Didache, the early church practiced fasting twice a week on Wednesdays and Fridays. (Didache 8)

<sup>4</sup> Catechism's were early church manuscripts most commonly used to teach new believers, or those interested in becoming a follower, of Jesus. Often they were taught in a series of questions and answers. This was a very practical (and Jewish) way to help the learner understand the depth of what they were studying. Reading through the various catechisms is one of the ways we can follow the theological developments and arguments throughout the early Church.

One of earliest known catechism's is the Didache, a document that was highly recommended by the Church Fathers and was only very narrowly rejected as part of the canon of Scripture (which isn't to say it was thought to be false or contained false doctrine.) As the Didache speaks much of Baptism, prayer, and fasting, It may prove to be an excellent book to study in preparation for Easter, even as our fellow saints used it almost 2,000 years ago for that same preparation.

<sup>5</sup> An early church catechism recorded by Cyril of Jerusalem describes how catechumens would study Scriptures daily, engage in fasting and prayer and undergo an exorcism before baptism.

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of the resurrection. The readings also prompt us to endure suffering. God demonstrates that He does not leave us alone in suffering, and that there will be a blessing in endurance.

**Hebraic Context.** The word covenant is  $\delta\iota\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\eta$  '*diatheka*' in Septuagint Greek', *testamentum* in Latin, and '*brit*' בְּרִית in Hebrew, where it occurs 284 times in the Hebrew Scriptures and is probably one of the Bible's most important concepts. Simply put, a covenant is an agreement between two contracting parties—these agreements might be about kingdoms, marriages, lands, or a bowl of stew.

Unfortunately, the Strong's exhaustive concordance (one of the most common tools in many pastor's studies) uses one extreme example of a covenant tradition (found in Genesis 15) to go ahead and define the word ברית, "from barah (in the sense of cutting)... a compact (because made by passing between pieces of flesh)".<sup>6</sup> This mistake has been continued and made more common as the Hebrew text does occasionally use the phrase, לְכַרֵּת בְּרִית 'l'carot brit' to cut a covenant (which is also found in Genesis 15:18).<sup>7</sup> Of course, many of the uses of the word '*brit*' in the Hebrew Bible do not involve the corresponding verb 'carat' to cut.<sup>8</sup>

As seen in our Genesis passage, covenants do not require blood offerings. In fact, while signs of a covenant can be useful, it is the agreement between the parties that is the actual covenant—and that need only be spoken. In the end, a covenant is only as good as the faithfulness of those who make the agreements—otherwise the covenant becomes a condemnation.<sup>9</sup> Just as Jesus said, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'". This doesn't mean that we should never make a covenant or take an oath—some oaths, such as in marriage and baptism, are still common and good. But if we take God as our example, although He

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<sup>6</sup> While ברית occurs 284 times, the words Strong's associates with it is ברה, used 5 times to speak of eating food, hardly the shining example of 'cutting'—mostly from a single story in II Samuel 13—and ברא, "to create", a completely different root from ברה.

<sup>7</sup> Another extreme example of a covenantal sign, which is still different than the covenant itself, would be when a cut is made on the arm to hands of the contracting parties who then mingle the blood together symbolically binding each side to the agreement.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the covenant in Genesis 9 does not use the verb 'to cut' a covenant while Jeremiah 31:31 does.

<sup>9</sup> This is hinted at in Psalm 89:34 "I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered" and Psalm 50:16 "But to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?'".

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makes both covenants and oaths, God also keeps His covenants and oaths—and so should we.<sup>10 11</sup>

**Genesis 9:8-17.** Following the aftermath of the Flood, the Lord enters into a unilateral covenant with all creation. This is the first covenant that God makes in Scripture.<sup>12</sup> In Genesis 8:21, God makes a statement, (what, for a human would often be considered an oath) “I will never again curse the ground because of man... 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.” Then, in Genesis 9:1-7, God blesses Noah. But neither of these are covenants. God’s covenant is actually “for every beast of the field”, along with Noah and his descendants.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 59:21 “And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the Lord: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the Lord, “from this time forth and forevermore.”

<sup>11</sup> Another example of a sign of a covenant is the covenant of salt mentioned in Numbers 18:19. God promises the children of Aaron, and later the Levites, that they would receive contributions from the people as their “perpetual due”. In an incredible covenant, God makes a promise that was to be kept by His faithful people. However, in Joel 1:8-13 the priests mourn, the ministers of God pass the night in sackcloth, “because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.” The food they were promised, the regular contributions that were their perpetual due according to God’s promise were being withheld—God’s promise was broken. “Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes...” God gives His faithful people responsibilities, and woe will befall us if we decide that we are, in fact, unfaithful.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 6:18 states that God would soon make a covenant with Noah. The order implies that the covenant would occur before Noah enters the ark, or upon entering it, but here in Genesis 9:8-17 is the first time we see the content of God’s covenant. Exodus 31:16-17 also shows that Shabbat became a sign of the covenant with Israel, and, while Shabbat is something God instituted at Creation, it was not stated to be a covenant nor the sign of a covenant at that time.

<sup>13</sup> Another reminder that, as focused on ourselves as we may be, humans aren’t the only things of importance on this earth.

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Many of the ancient covenants made between parties in antiquity are said to have involved some sort of animal sacrifice, though this is not always (or even often) the case.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, here in Genesis, animals are not sacrificed as they are participants themselves in the covenant and even the beneficiaries of a unilateral covenant.<sup>15</sup> The first covenant of God is with both mankind and animals. The rainbow then becomes a sign for the Lord to remember His covenant.

**Psalm 25:1-10.** Psalm 25 is a personal lament of David before the Lord.<sup>16</sup> Troubling situations are an unfortunate fact of life and thus the majority of us will be able to identify with David's lament. David composed this Psalm in order to plead for assistance, instruction, salvation, and forgiveness—David, in his time of trouble, wrote out another beautiful and beautifully heartfelt prayer to God.<sup>17</sup> David asked for help while 'waiting on the Lord'.<sup>18</sup>

David asks for instruction when he asks God to 'show me Your ways'. We all know that God's Word has good advice and we should not ignore it. Psalm 25:10 is going to be popular, "All the paths of the LORD are loving and true." Unfortunately, the second half may have been ignored by a few to many who heard it "For those who keep His covenant and His testimonies."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Covenants are not an oath with a blood component. Covenants and treaties were commonplace between ancient kings. Elaborate ceremonies, marriage arrangements, and sacrifices often did seal such agreements—also making the treaty public—but these covenants were not always sealed with a blood sacrifice. Monetary goods, such as jewelry, were often used in the cases of marriage.

The lower classes would not always afford livestock as sacrifices nor any other expensive sign of a covenant to seal contracts. Many traditions arose in different places and times. Some we only encounter once in literature, such as removing a sandal and transferring it to the new owner, as seen in Ruth 4:7. But such acts were commonplace throughout the world, varying slightly, or greatly, based on local culture and capability.

There are several signs of a covenant mentioned throughout Scripture. Two involve blood, the Circumcision and the Eucharist. But the sign of the rainbow and the sign of the Sabbath (Exodus 31:16-17) do not.

<sup>15</sup> This covenant doesn't bind the earth, animals, or people (besides God) to any obligation.

<sup>16</sup> The genre of lament is common in the Book of Psalms, comprising the largest category of psalms. There are 42 individual psalms of lament and 16 national laments, which is more than a third of the book.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 25 is also an acrostic poem, each line being well crafted and thought out expressions of truth beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

<sup>18</sup> Waiting, *קָוָה*, is an active verb in Hebrew. 'To wait' is linked with other verbs such as "to look" in Job 6:19 or "be strong and take courage" in Psalm 27:14. In modern parlance, a waiter doesn't "wait all the day long" doing nothing—a waiter is constantly paying attention and then acting where appropriate. If waiting were completely passive, there would be no need for the Lord to renew their strength, as seen in Isaiah 40:31. Indeed, those who wait are also flying, running, and even walking.

<sup>19</sup> In a similar way to Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good." This is probably one of the most quoted verses in the Bible. The bit after it is often ignored, or focused on entirely depending on if you are in a home or a classroom, while the prologue, "For those who love God" somehow also gets

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One of the meters of a covenantal relationship with God is the value we place on His instructions. Much of David's cause for lament didn't come from people who knew nothing of God's covenants but from those who knew, but did not listen or obey (including David himself). The value we place on God's instructions isn't defined by a number system but on whether we actually bother to be faithful and obey (keep) God's covenants (or run back to Him when we fail).

**I Peter 3:18-22.** Peter introduces two subject matters that most modern preachers will have difficulty preaching through. Or, to be more specific, he doesn't introduce two subjects so much as use them as an illustration to make a point. Peter urged his community to "obtain a blessing" through reacting to bad situations with charity and mercy. This doesn't mean we must always keep silent, Peter specifically states that part of the community's reactions entails giving a defence (reason) for the hope we have (yet, doing so with gentleness and respect).<sup>20</sup> But our defence is largely one of our actions, "who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?"<sup>21</sup> And, unfortunately in the world we live in, the answer may be multitudes. But even so, we should "have no fear of them."

The model of our lifestyle (and the reason for our hope), of course, is the Messiah who, even after death, went to bring hope and light to those in dark places—the 'spirits' in prison.<sup>22</sup> Peter

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ignored—perhaps we assume that we do love God or perhaps love has become such a modern, nebulous term it has no meaning anymore.

For those who love God, all things work together... because what can separate us from the love of Christ? And then Paul lists things that the majority of us would not consider to be good, "Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" To clarify, God's love was shown through Jesus' death. If we love God, we too may live in obedience to God, even if that obedience means we face...death. And that is also good.

<sup>20</sup> There is an early Talmudic parallel to these instructions of Peter in Pirkei Avot 2:9 which says, "Rabbi Eleazar said: 'Be diligent in the study of Torah. Know what to answer a heretic. Know before Whom you toil. And faithful is your Employer that He will pay you the reward for your labor.'"

<sup>21</sup> Being zealous for what is good can't be defined by what we think or what our culture claims we should be zealous for. Good is: having sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and humility (humility being something we often quickly forget about when we become zealous.) Good is: being self-controlled, loving one another, serving one another.

<sup>22</sup> Peter may be connecting Jesus' descent to the realm of the dead (Sheol) with many incidents that appear in 2nd Temple period Jewish literature, especially the Book of Enoch. Enoch expands the incident in Genesis 6:1-4 in which fallen angels are imprisoned in Sheol by the angel Michael. The spirits mentioned here then may refer to fallen angels or their human-angel descendants. Many of the Church Fathers understood this passage to refer to Jesus' descent into Hades which became known as the 'Harrowing of Hell' and has entered the Nicene Creed. Tradition aside, the New Testament provides no

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connects the disobedient spirits with the disobedience of the world during the days of Noah. Peter allegorizes the waters of baptism with that of Noah's family that were saved from the Flood waters by the Ark. Bodily immersion was a widespread Jewish practice that was linked to the idea that the life coming from the living God overcomes death, and Peter also linked immersion (from a place of death) with the resurrection of the Messiah.<sup>23</sup> As our model, Jesus suffered as the righteous one for the unrighteous. As our hope, He stands in authority with power at the right hand of God.

**Mark 1:9-15.** The temptation of Jesus by the Devil in the wilderness is recorded in all three Synoptic gospels (John's gospel neglects to mention either the baptism or the subsequent desert experience of Jesus). Mark's account is typically brief and lacking in much information—he makes no mention of fasting, nor the nature of the temptation by Satan but does include one piece of information that Matthew and Luke do not. Mark mentions that Jesus was with the wild animals.<sup>24</sup>

Wild animals often assist the heroes of God and, perhaps, their presence in Mark's gospel is not an indication of danger as much as one of aid, along with the attending angels.<sup>25</sup> Adam was at

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reason for why Jesus preached to the spirits, or to the nature of the preaching, nor to the results. Any conclusion we make regarding this passage should be acknowledged as a conclusion from silence.

<sup>23</sup> During the 2nd Temple Period, Jews were generally cautious in avoiding impurity. Such a state could be either ethical and ritual. The former was addressed through repentance, the latter by bodily immersion. Impurity occurs, primarily, when a Jew comes into contact with death: a corpse; a leper; a visibly decaying person (skin disease etc); and the loss of sexual flows which create life. The God of Israel is a God of Life and can not abide either sin or death. Being "tainted" with death would prevent entrance to the Temple and depending on the level of impurity would mandate being separated from the community until purified (Hannah Harrington, *Holiness* page 194). The waters of immersion must be living water - natural, flowing water not touched by human hands, symbolically expressing God's power over death.

<sup>24</sup> A prevailing critical view of the Synoptic gospels suggests that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, known as Marcan priority. A glaring issue, according to some, with that theory is that Mark fails to mention the fasting of Jesus as well as the specifics of His temptations, which begs the question from where did both Matthew and Luke draw their information from, and why do both Matthew and Luke neglect to mention the presence of the wild animals in the wilderness? Questions like this led critical scholars to suggest a mysterious document that has neither been found in archaeology nor the church fathers called Q as a secondary source alongside Mark.

The problem with the Q source is that it creates a problem that doesn't exist and, if that problem did exist, it would be answered much more simply and logically with other explanations. Ignoring the understanding that all Scripture is of God (a belief many of these critical scholars categorically deny as being possible), the gospel writers were able to conduct interviews (in fact, the same person may have been interviewed by multiple authors of Scripture), many passages in their writings show a first-hand account (either from an interview or because the writer was actually present), and they very well may have quoted one-another at one point while writing another point elsewhere.

<sup>25</sup> See Hebraic Perspective

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peace with the animal kingdom in the Garden of Eden. He enjoyed their company and was given the responsibility to name all the creatures of the earth. The New Testament refers to Jesus as a second Adam, in this way He would enjoy a similar relationship with the animal kingdom. In the messianic age the animals that would normally cause harm to humans are prophesied to be at peace with each other. “The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest” (Isaiah 11:8).

The gospels note that Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days. The number 40 is significant in Jewish tradition: The rainfall of Noah’s Flood occurred over 40 days and 40 nights; Moses spent 40 days with the Lord on Mt. Sinai (which also included fasting from food and drink as did Elijah when travelling to Mt. Sinai); the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness before the conquest of Canaan; etc. Each of these periods of 40 days contains times of testing and preparation before something momentous follows that set period of time. The rains of the Flood stop, leading to the eventual release from the Ark and the building of a new world; Moses returns from the mountain with the Commandments of God; and the children of Israel enter the Promised Land. In the opening verses of Mark’s gospel the ministry of Jesus begins after the time of testing in the wilderness.<sup>26</sup> The initial message of Jesus is the same as John’s; the kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel.

**Hebraic Perspective.** Animal life is a major feature of the Creation with the opening chapter of Genesis devoting six verses to describe the creation of the animal kingdom, including those that walked, flew, crawled and swam (Genesis 1:20-25). In comparison, Adam (man) received a single verse to describe his coming into being. Prior to the Fall the animal world was not at odds with itself or with mankind. Genesis describes how Adam named all the animals. In a later Jewish tradition, Adam was said to even give God a name that was also related to God being the Lord over all creatures.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout Scripture animals are shown to offer a supportive role to some of the heroes of God. From Noah, who sent a raven and dove to explore the ability to live in the world to the prophet Elijah who had ravens come to feed him while on the run from Jezebel. Later, the prophet Elisha has a bear fight on his behalf against taunting young men while Daniel was shown God’s protection through lions. The Jewish sages like to use the creation order to warn against pride

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<sup>26</sup> John’s gospel suggests that Jesus had a ministry that was concurrent with John the Baptists and prior to John being imprisoned. John 3:22-24 has both John and Jesus preached and baptized in the Galilee region.

<sup>27</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah 19.3, “When He had created Adam, He made them [cattle, wild beasts, and fowl] pass before him. He said to him, ‘What are the names of these?’... It is so stated (in Genesis 2:20), ‘So Adam recited names’ He said to him, ‘And you, what is your name?’ Adam said to him, ‘Adam, because I was created out of the ground.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, ‘I, what is My name?’ He said to him, “‘The LORD, because you are Lord over all creatures,’ namely as written (in Isaiah 42:8), ‘I am the LORD, that is My name,’”

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saying “whenever you feel the urge to be prideful be reminded that; ‘even a mosquito proceeded you’” (Sanhedrin 38a).

In the messianic era animals will once again pose no threat to human beings. The Torah itself has many passages that describe the appropriate care and use of animals, not only for sacrifices and food. The animal world is part of the creation, there are creatures on earth as well as creatures in heaven. And, according to the prophet in Hosea 2:18, God will make another covenant with the wild animals.