

Mark 1:9-15

To start off Lent I want to talk to you about the idea of Covenant as relationship...see the entirety of the Bible describes how one can be a righteous person...now the word righteous in Hebrew does not mean self-righteousness as many like to take it...but rather it actually points to being in a right relationship with God... the word is Shalom!

Throughout the Old Testament we can see that Israel, as a people, are constantly struggling and evolving with this notion of being in relationship with their Creator. And the Old Testament writers weave an intricate story describing this in terms of Covenants. God reaching out to his children, and we respond. Covenants were between a greater and a lesser (a king and his subjects/ a parent and a child).

Our response to God can take on many forms... and we see throughout the landscape of the Old Testament - the many colorful people that “respond” to God. Sometimes the Bible starts to look more like a photo album rather than a book of rules and commands. People at a certain place and time - in relationship with God... or not!

When you go home later today - look at your high school yearbook...look at your hairstyle...would you be caught dead in that today? You see a snapshot in time doesn't tell you everything about a person does it? People aren't static...they hopefully evolve.

In the Bible we see people described in this way, we see their doubts, fears, anger, frustrations, suffering, disobedience; we see them all just being human. Over and over we see God's love for them continually played out against the background of human emotions. This relationship is not static and so God continually reaches out to us ever waiting for our response.

What's interesting is that how we come to view God also changes to include how the Bible talks about God.

Even as we transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament we see the emphasis changes from rules and laws, meant to define our relationships and community behavior, to what the spirit of being in a relationship should feel like and be for us.

We transform from a rule based relationship to a relationship with love at its foundation. Jesus tells us that when we love that all the laws and rules hang together and that makes sense at a deeper level.

The Bible then becomes a living photo album describing God's love for us in action and our response to that love. As the relationship matures and deepens so does the depth of the relationship...we see the photos begin to change.

The Bible ultimately becomes a love story. It starts out as a parent would love their child. The parent sets boundaries and establishes the rules one follows to live in right relationship with the family and with the community that they will grow up in. But as the child matures and begins to think more independently, they of course think they know better and rebel against the very authority that provided their early framework and boundaries.

They now become influenced by things and new friends outside the family... in the world... and they attempt to test the boundaries that have been set for them. They begin to experience life independently and sometimes that leads to the very human experiences of doubt and fear as they struggle with who they are; along with their purpose and place in the world. Ideally when they falter, their parents are there to love, comfort, protect and teach them.

Israel clearly goes on this same journey throughout the Old Testament. Seen in a child's maturing relationship as they grow. Now from the parent's point of view... we someday hope that as our children grow up that they begin to understand the rules for what they were...a parent's expression of love to keep them safe and to form them into the person they will one day grow up to be.

As the child reaches adulthood the spirit of the rules becomes clear and they hopefully transcend the rules. Their foundational ethics and response to love takes them forward to begin the process all over again within their own children and families. The Old Testament plays out this human transformation with all its myriad variations and yes most definitely it's all its dysfunctions as well.

This process of being in relationship is the idea of being in covenant with one another. It is not a static place where boundaries are once established and maintained. Instead the rules of behavior establish the guidelines and ethical structure that we start with...the beginning.

From there the relationship can take on many forms. And if love and serving the other is at the core of the relationship then the relationship will grow into a healthy one - based on mutual respect and love. The covenant therefore becomes an ever-changing dance that constantly re-establishes and builds the relationship we have with God or one another.

So the Bible then is not just a static story about a group of people living 2000 years ago.

Rather it describes the evolution of what being in a human relationship with our God and with one another looks and feels like. It is a model by which one can love one another... but first we must consider this through looking at the world from through the other person's point of view...that is... we must be open to the other... and in doing so be open to actually changing ourselves as well.

Where the "other" establishes what a relational covenant may look like. Once we see where someone's perspective is and what's motivating them, we can then better understand where they are. For example, if people are having trouble making ends meet, feeling insecure, or not knowing how they will get by day-to-day; they pray for a "provider" God to answer their prayers. When the Israelites needed manna in the desert, they prayed for provision.

See it's hard to have God transform you into a "self-actualized" Christian when your stomach is empty and you perceive your very survival to be in question. God will always take the form of whatever we need as we reach out to God and to others for help. When trying to connect with someone it is imperative that we meet them where "they" are, not where "we" are. (The parent must relate and talk at the child's level of understanding)

Only then can we begin to establish the trust necessary to begin a "right" relationship with that person; a living, transforming covenant. This process is played out time and time again in the Bible throughout both the Old and New Testaments. God meets us where we are, and once in covenant with God we are transformed. Even God's name adapts -Yahweh transforms from meaning I am what I am... into meaning I become, what I am Becoming! (Same word)

At the heart of our reaching out to one another in covenant is love.

Agape...seeing and being open to the other...and perceiving them where they are.

Many think we are striving to get "to" God. That is to say we are ever striving to be good little disciples and follow the way of Jesus so as to gain worth in God's eyes... and in doing so gain self-worth...like many children do.

But it's actually the complete opposite of the way we should think about our relationship with God. We hear today God first speaking in scriptures to his child Jesus: "You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased". Notice God says this at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, before Jesus ever does anything! God is saying we are worthy of God's love right from the start! We are worthy without doing anything...think of a newborn trying to earn their parents' love...they are loved right from their creation...God loves us and reaches out to us first...we call this Grace! The parent always makes the first move.

We keep searching for God, searching for love, searching for approval...when these things have already been given to us! We have only to know that God has always been right there with us all along. Repent, in Greek - metanoia, means to change ones' mind or to physically turn around and walk in a different direction.

When we can't see God one literally just needs to turn around! See the only thing that can ever separate us from God's love is our own limited perspective... and much of that is determined by where we are on life's journey at any given time.

This lent let us prepare the way for Christ by re-evaluating our relationships ...with God and one another.

And lent is also a time intimately linked with baptism. Baptism means dying to your old self and being made new and sharing in Christ's resurrection.

This morning we heard the Flood story which tells of the very first covenant, the covenant God makes with Noah and his descendants. In this passage God promises never again to destroy the earth and us along with it. Our part of the bargain in this new relationship is that we humans must live fruitfully, engaging in the creative transformation and mutual well-being of the world...Creating Shalom!

Together with God we map out a new dimension of redemptive action for the world: God from now on will deal with sin and corruption, not by destroying it, but by transforming it; humans from now on are called to be agents of such redemptive transformation...sowing with God the very fruits of grace into a broken world.

The covenant between God and Noah thus sets the stage for all other covenants to follow in order to establish right-relationship and mutual well-being for all of creation.

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” Jesus is given the authority through Baptism to call people to “repent” and “believe” the good news that God’s reign is at hand. Jesus’ reenactment of the Noah story and the Exodus puts him in a position to re-announce a new covenant of co-creative redemptive action between God and God's creations.

God promises never again to destroy all life with a flood; or, in other words, God promises never again to respond to destruction and sin with destruction.

Answering destructiveness with destruction, attempting to deal with corruption simply by erasing its effects, does not get at the root cause of corruption, nor does it heal our inclination towards violence.

By promising to never again destroy all life... God is in effect repenting - promising to deal with the problem of sin and evil by more creative means than simply wiping it out off the face of the planet. It is in this moment that God is depicted as choosing to be a Redeemer, above and beyond being Creator and Destroyer. It marks a change in the way the Bible storytellers begin to understand and relate to God.

Noah presents a new possibility to God. Transformation of sin...It is this new possibility of redemptive action that allows for further covenants with Abraham, Moses, Jesus and then finally each one of us at our own Baptismal covenant.

You probably didn't realize that in the Old Testament Joshua was a liberator...and he liberated Israel by the sword - destruction. In the new Testament there is another liberator named Joshua and he liberates through love. Repentance - walk in a new direction. Seeing transformation through the perspective of Jesus whose Hebrew name was (Yeshua) Joshua meaning God Saves! So will God now save through Love or Death?!

Christ overcame sin not by destroying it, but by transforming it through his own death and resurrection. And likewise baptism transforms our sinful nature into a new birth and a new covenant with God.

When the waters subsided, Noah and his family and all the animals emerged from the ark into a brand new world. And God put a rainbow in the sky as a sign that the earth would never again be destroyed. See sometimes we all need a fresh start... a fresh perspective.

How many of you can remember getting really dirty and coming home and going straight to the bathtub? Doesn't it feel great when you come out of the water all clean?

Our lives are all in continual need of cleaning. Sometimes we need a little ash on our foreheads to make us stop and think...

We all get dirty! ...The story of Noah, the story of Jesus' Baptism, reminds us that no matter how "dirty" or wrong our lives get, and we will all get dirty...that God will wash us clean and give us fresh start, over and over and over again if need be...you see our relationships are never static...and they are always headed somewhere... for better or for worse.

So this lent may you be open to seeing God's redeeming love in your own life... and over the next forty days...look at the promises you have made...at your baptism, at your wedding, with your children...with your church.

...and at the end of your forty days may you come to feel renewed...may you come to feel clean...may you come to experience GRACE!

Shalom!

Your faithful servant,

carmen