



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The Bow in the Sky
The First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 21, 2021
The Rev. Scott Walters

You may not know that Lent at Calvary began with a deluge this year. It takes a lot to make the headlines these days.

Basically the situation was this. A global pandemic brought on by a novel coronavirus already meant that Ash Wednesday would have to happen at a distance of six feet, behind facemasks, with ashes imposed on oneself after passing a hand sanitation station in the aisle. And that's just for the few worshipers who'd take part in person. Most of us would be praying along through our laptops and phones. But we were almost used to the drill by now, even if the present version of the liturgy was something like version 17.0.

But then its worst snow storm since the 1960s buried Memphis during the longest stretch of subfreezing temperatures in 80 years. Which meant that for the first time in the pandemic, our liturgy could not be live-streamed from Calvary's chancel.

Ok, fine. Ash Wednesday would be version 17.1.

In the course of about 24 hours, Kristin recorded the prelude on the family piano. Sam and Joseph Powell chanted psalms in their home recording studio. Our lectors, Gary Hager and Sarah Squire, were set up on the streaming service, allowing them to read the lessons from their dining rooms. Except the Hager's internet got knocked out when a tree limb came down in the storm and his cell service wasn't adequate. But that's ok. Sarah would just read both lessons. Amber recorded her sermon in case the rolling blackouts Arkansas was threatening rolled through West Memphis, but ended up being able to preach in real time what was, miraculously, the first Calvary sermon preached into a laptop screen this year.

But after all that, thanks especially to Noah Glenn and Robyn Banks, our virtual, ashless Ash Wednesday happened. It was honestly quite beautiful, moving, sacred. And the form we'd settled on by about 4pm went off without a hitch at 7. Probably because the universe was fresh out of hitches at that point.

Or so we thought. Until I got a call from Harry at 8. He told me in the calm, upbeat voice only Helario Reyna can muster under the circumstances, that the sprinkler system was emptying itself in the Calvary kitchen.

I'm sorry. Did I mention that the coronavirus editions of Lenten Preaching Series, and, more relevant to the deluge in the kitchen, Waffle Shop were supposed to open on Friday as well? Fortunately that snow storm meant the food delivery trucks and volunteers couldn't make it in so we had to cancel the first day of Waffle Shop.

So, all we had to deal with was a couple of inches of water on the floor. Well, as well as everything it soaked or shorted out on its way down. Harry and I pushed the water toward the floor drains for a while until we leaned on our broom handles long enough to realize most of the water we were moving was ending up in our socks. We'd let it drain overnight and Harry, Mary, and Gary would assess the damage in the morning.

He offered me a grapefruit Topo Chico. We toasted. Turned out the lights and went home, praying that the flood waters would recede by morning. Or at least for a dove to drop an olive branch in the alley as a sign that all would be well enough someday.

In the larger scheme of things, all the above adds up to is a short string of small inconveniences, especially compared to the hardships and grief so many people have endured. We have friends in Texas in the throes of a real and dangerous situation.

Even so, I was beginning to feel a little like Wile E. Coyote and kept an eye peeled for falling anvils for a day or so.

There are days when even lives as comfortable and privileged as this one can feel like the universe has turned some flicker of its vast attention toward us. And doesn't like what it sees. Know what I mean?

Fate or karma. Kismet or providence. Divine judgement or a run of bum luck. Humans have had many ways of talking about why bad things happen to good people, or why bad things happen at all, since long before Rabbi Kushner wrote his confidently titled little book.

And when I'm not actively shaking my fist at the sky, there's just enough distance from the question to actually be curious about the similarities and the differences in the ways people have told their stories about why things got bad. Especially that one time when they got really, really bad.

You may well have heard that the story of a divinely orchestrated flood, intended to put an end to human life, appears in many ancient texts and cultures, not just the book of Genesis. Some have used the variety of accounts as evidence that a flood really did once cover the face of the

earth. I'm not so sure about that. But it seems to me that if you've been taught that the sky is a dome holding back the waters of chaos, as it was in many ancient cosmologies, anxiety about what a tear in that membrane would mean was bound to produce nightmarish stories about it, don't you think? How about a quick survey of a few.

In an ancient Sumerian myth, humans are fashioned from clay, and, for reasons less clear than in Genesis, the gods soon decide to destroy them in a flood. But the god Enki disagreed and warned a man named Ziusudra to build a big boat. After he survived, he prostrated himself before the gods and was granted immortality for living a godly life...whatever that meant, given the gods in question.

In the Gilgamesh epic a man and his wife along with a lot of animals survive the great deluge in a big boat as well. They were also made deities as a reward.

Zeus, king of all gods, is the one in Greek mythology who flies off the handle one day and decides to do humanity in with a flood. But Deucalion, son of Prometheus, the creator of humankind...you guessed it, built an ark and rode out the flood until they landed on Mount Parnassus.

Further east, in India, it was Manu who survived. He built his boat after being warned by a fish, to whom he'd been kind, about the great flood that was coming. He tied his boat to the fish's horn, which towed him to safety on a mountain. And even the far off Aztecs believed four previous worlds existed before the present one, but were each destroyed in catastrophes, the last of which was a flood that lasted 52 years. Only one man and one woman survived, sheltering in a giant cypress tree. But later they got turned into dogs.

If hearing about these other flood narratives makes the story of Noah and the ark seem silly, childish, or naive, that's not what I intended. If it seems like modern, scientific folks like us should pay about as much mind to them as we do the Tooth Fairy, I disagree. What I want is for these other stories to remind us that we're all — you knew I'd eventually say it — in the same boat. Trying to figure out what to do with the feeling we're being put upon by the universe at times. And, come on, even if you don't believe in God, you know the feeling too. You're welcome on the boat as well.

And it's only from here, from the midst of all these stories, which have arisen from a common human experience of loss and lack of ultimate control, which is as old as the earth and as recent as the morning news... It's from here that I want us to look back at the story of Noah that you and I received from our Hebrew forbears. One that seems so similar to the rest...until it's not.

After the flood, Noah and his family do not become gods. They are not granted immortality. But they are given a promise. A promise and a sign. God's weapon, a great and colorful bow, is laid down for good in the Hebrew story. It is pointed up at the sky and away from us forever, to remind us every time the sun cuts through a rain, that any deluge to come will not be God's doing. A reminder that God has made a covenant with all the descendants of Noah, which are all the human beings who will ever be, and with every living creature on earth, the story says, that God will not be our destroyer.

This does not mean that there will be no more destruction. A few verses earlier God said, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth..." There's no illusion that our inclinations do not remain destructive. But God has made us for better things. Better ways than violence. Closer kinship with other creatures and with the living earth itself.

That laid down bow is meant to be comfort. To you, if you feel like you're drowning. Whatever is rising to your neck right now, know that it is not about God's displeasure in who you are. Way down at the base of our understanding of things as Christians and Jews, down at the covenantal level, the foundation, God's bow still lies unstrung, beautiful and benign, in the sky as a reminder.

But the relinquished weapon is a challenge and a responsibility to us as well. It means we should not assign sinister and vengeful motives to God when bad things happen. But it also means we can't lay the damage we do at God's feet either. And what God has given us is not just one another. But the creatures and the fruitfulness of the earth itself.

Noah is not rewarded with a life in the sky with the gods. Noah, we're told, was a man of the soil. He goes on to plant the first vineyard and makes the first jug of wine, which will be a source both of joy and of pain in his family from the beginning.

Within the covenant, there is both room and the expectation that we tend faithfully to relationships among all the things of the earth, from the people in our households to the stranger on the road, and also to the life of vineyards and rivers and forests, and to the soil that holds and feeds them. To every living thing. Which the story says clearly is included in the covenant as surely as you and I are. Every thing, right down to the plumped up robins on my porch escaping the snow, and even to the doubly buried earthworms escaping them, to live another day. They're included or no one is.

In the story we've received, we're not asked to choose between a cold, meaningless universe, devoid of right and wrong, and a universe controlled right down to the day's weather by capricious gods who might just do us all in if we don't please them.

What we're given is the space to live generously and well, by way of a covenant with the loving source of all things. A covenant that says first that our source will not destroy us. But also, that in the little realm of freedom we have been allotted, within all that's beyond our understanding and control, we are to spend our lives tending to one another, to all creatures, and to this wounded creation itself. Living humbly, generously, with a kindness and care that reflects, however dimly, that of the God who once laid down a bow in the sky, with a promise never to pick it up again.