

Weekly Reading – Monday, February 23, 2009

Lent begins this week, and in view here are the lessons for Lent I. With Lent in mind, and as I noted over at "What's Tony Thinking?" page, some readers may find my Articles of Faith column of 2/21/09 on Original Sin to be useful and adaptable. You can pick it up by clicking on the Columnist bar on this site and following the links. Also some readers may be interested in my upcoming (March) on-line course "What's Theology Got to Do With It?" based on my book of the same title. It is offered by Andover-Newton Seminary, click on www.ants.edu/learn. Registration deadline is February 27. Let's do theology! But now, let's do theology with reference to the texts for Sunday, March 1, 2009.

Genesis 9: 8 - 17

"Never again." "Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." With these words God makes a new covenant with all humankind and with the world. "Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of flood." It's worth pondering, in our multi-cultural, multi-religious world that God makes this covenant with the whole creation, not one person, one group, one tribe or one religion. Our God is committed to all creation and all humankind. There are other subsequent covenants by which God binds the divine being to a particular people for God's larger project for the sake of all people, but here the covenant is with all creation. The reminder of this commitment, the sticky-note in the heavens so to speak, is the rainbow. Don't rainbows always suggest blessing, promise, providence, and grace? Aren't they always a gift and a wonder? But here's the thing, the rainbow is not for us. At least not first of all. First of all, according to Genesis 9, the rainbow is a reminder to God of God's covenant and commitment to not lose the divine cool and patience so fully ever again as to send a devastating flood upon the whole earth. I wonder how many people in New Orleans turned to this passage during Katrina and Rita and wondered if God had forgotten? The idea that God needs a reminder is a provocative one. Certainly if God needs reminders of God's commitments and covenant, how much more do we need reminders of our own covenants and commitments, hence, Lent. A reminder of our covenant, a reminder of God's covenant.

I Peter 3: 18 - 22

Peter packs a lot into these five verses. They are chosen both for the general applicability to Lent and for the specific connection to Noah. I wonder if the line, v. 19, "in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison," is the origin of the part of the Apostles Creed about "descended into hell"? The overall theme is God's resolute action to seek out and redeem those trapped in the prison of Sin. In this sense, the epistle lesson takes a decisive step beyond the Genesis reading. In Genesis, God commits not to destroy. Here God's commitment is to save. Baptism, which some lenten pilgrims or catechumens, now prepare for is seen both along the lines of the flood, cleansing the earth, and as a kind of rainbow, a sign and reminder to Christians, "an appeal to God for a good conscience." Is the appeal to God or to us or both? Little hard to tell. The larger context (read the preceding verses) is that suffering on account of one's faith happens ("suffering for doing good"). When we experience such suffering for doing good ("No good deed goes unpunished!") we aren't alone. Christ too suffered in the cause of righteousness. His suffering bringing the

righteousness to the unrighteousness. ("By grace you are saved through faith.") The business of suffering for doing good is a direct challenge to theologies that equate suffering with God's judgment and as punishment (even non-believers often operate with such a theology).

Mark 1: 9 - 15

When Mark is the Gospel of the Year the traditional reading for Lent I, the temptation of Jesus, lacks the more extended narrative and three-fold elaboration that we have come to expect in Matthew and Luke. Here, Mark-wise, the story is terse but vivid. We also get the baptism of Christ thrown in with the deal, which gives us an opportunity to ponder the cheek-by-jowl relation of baptism (a high moment and profound affirmation) with temptation (a low time and period of testing). The highs don't preclude the lows. They sometimes seem to invite them. As brief as Mark's account is, it really is vivid. "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." The three-fold supporting cast is interesting: Satan, wild beasts and angels. He wasn't alone out there. This year, in the midst of economic downturn and huge uncertainty, we have been driven into a kind of wilderness too. Preachers might at least acknowledge that we are in a time of testing as a people and as individuals. Moreover, we shall be tempted. Satan will be at work in this time (as he was in the time of prosperity). What are the wild beasts that prowl about in such times? And what of the angels? This should be a year, more than some, when testing, temptation and endurance are resonant themes for those in the congregation. But in the end the message is about Christ, that he too was tempted and tested as we are, and while we do fail, he did not. He remained steadfast in the face of temptation and now (see Peter) goes before us and with us in the midst of our own trials and temptations. "Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that might be: Christ Jesus certainly. And he shall win the battle." (Luther, A Mighty Fortress)