

FORTY DAYS OF HONESTY

I Peter 3: 18-22
Genesis 9:8-17

Faith Community
March 5, 2006

Introduction

Last August hurricane Katrina hit the southern coast of the US doing tremendous damage to that region. Whole city blocks of homes and businesses were wiped out. Hundreds of people died and tens of thousands were displaced. The unemployment figure for the regions suddenly zoomed, as many people no longer had places to go to work.

During this past week the annual Mardi Gras took on a new look. Much of it was satirical concerning the miserable response of FEMA; many of the festivities were dampened by the tragedy that occurred, some people even refused to participate in Mardi Gras because it was inappropriate to celebrate when so many people were still in pain.

This hurricane was a horrible event. It will take years to recover.

I

When we see pictures of Katrina, we get a better image of the story of the Great Flood and Noah's Ark. If the destruction of Katrina seems unbelievable, imagine everything on earth being wiped out with a flood. It was not just hundreds of buildings blown over, but every building, every home, everyone drowned in a worldwide flood.

We often think of Noah's Ark as a wonderful children's story – with little fabric arks to put tiny animals on. But this is such an adult story – everything in the world was destroyed! It is a story of horrible destruction and death. This is no child's story! Protect your children from it!

The other understanding was that the world had become so horrible that God had no choice but to destroy it all and start over again. God was sorry he had created the world and humans and so he got rid of everything except for Noah, his family and two of each animal on earth. It was the miserable failure of humans that led to the end of everything.

II

We actually have a worldwide destruction of our own making going on right now. If God decided to end the world because it was so evil, we appear to be destroying this world ourselves by our own actions. Consider this reality:

During a twenty-year period the world lost 200 million hectares of trees. This is an area roughly the size of the United States east of the Mississippi. For the most part this loss of trees was replaced by deserts, which increased in this same period by 120 million hectares – more land than is currently cultivated by China.

The world lost 480 billion tons of topsoil to erosion – an amount equal to the total land currently farmed by India. The loss of trees meant further reduction in our planet's ability to process carbon dioxide and thus increased the effect of global warming. Also, this loss of soil meant we have even more difficulty feeding the additional 1.6 billion people added to the world's population in that 20-year period. We are ruining God's creation through greed on the one hand and neglect on the other.

III

Our scripture reading this morning from I Peter gave a wholly different application to the story of the Great Flood. I don't know if you caught it, but Peter says that our baptisms as Christians are like that great flood. In our baptism we drown the old and bring life to the new – we do away with the unhealthy and turn our lives over to Christ.

Baptism is starting new, in the same way that God started new after the flood. We start fresh with a promise from God.

Martin Luther once said that baptism only takes a few minutes to do, but a whole lifetime to finish. In baptism we put the past behind us – we let it go – and begin to live a new life in Christ.

IV

Lent is an important time to think about our baptism and what it means to us. This is a season when we look at our relationship with God and ask how it can be stronger. It is a season of reflecting on and reevaluating our lives.

Traditionally, Lent has been a somber and serious time. It is a time of taking stock. One theologian has called it “Forty Days of Honesty.” We ask, “What must go from my life?” We also look at “How can I more faithfully live my baptismal vows?” We take a realistic look at ourselves.

We realize that often we see faults in others, but not in ourselves. Standing in a Dorset cemetery in Vermont, Dr. Liddle, the beloved but austere town doctor, angrily berated the local stonemason, Yank Tully. Tully had made a mistake on a tombstone the doctor had ordered. “How could you make such a mistake? How can you misspell ‘Gertrude’?” The mason wasn't terribly contrite. He looked up at the doctor and said, “Well, Doc, the way I figure it, there are more of your mistakes in here, than there are of mine.”

During Lent we look at ourselves – What have been our mistakes? Where have we relied on God, where have we tried to do it all ourselves? We evaluate ourselves, not just personally, but globally. It's not just that I haven't cheated or stolen or killed anyone, but who have I treated unjustly, who have I taken advantage of, and what have I done for the good of God's earth? We look inward at our personal lives and outward at our lives with other people.

Conclusion

Isn't it good to have these forty days of honesty? It's an opportunity to step back, look honestly and realistically at ourselves, knowing that we do this standing on a foundation of God's unconditional love for us.

Amen