

Sermon – Fr. Robert E. Gahler
Trinity St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, New Rochelle, NY
March 1, 2009

The First Sunday In Lent:
The Temptation of Our Lord, Year B

Scripture

Jewish Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25: 1-9

Christian Scripture: Romans 1st Peter 3: 18-22

Gospel: Mark 1: 9-15

Hymns

Entrance Procession: The Great Litany Sung in Procession

(S-67, *The Hymnal 1982*)

Concluding with the *Kyrie*: D. Hurd

(S-86, *The Hymnal 1982*)

Sequence Hymn: *Aus der Tiefe rufe ich*

(#150, *The Hymnal 1982*)

Offertory Hymn: *Bourbon*

(#147, *The Hymnal 1982*)

Post Communion Hymn: *Yield not to temptation*

(#170, *Lift Every Voice & Sing II*)

Retiring Procession: *Ein feste Burg*

(#688, *The Hymnal 1982*)

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

The Leaflet Art: “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” So God says to Noah in our reading from Genesis today, explaining the meaning of the rainbow. Our cover is a detail of one of our stained glass windows that provides us with a veritable rainbow of colors, if not in the form of a bow. Can you find it here in Church? In this setting over an expanse of water, the artist gives us a trinity of sea gulls exulting in the diaphanous skies; the one in the lower right seems about to execute a flip! St. Peter, in our second lesson today, sees survival in the Ark amid the Flood as prefiguring salvation through the water of baptism. In our Gospel, after his baptism, Jesus triumphs over temptation. The rainbow colors on our cover today remind us of our hope,

grounded in the God of Noah and of Jesus, that we also can conquer temptations. Photograph by Francis Logan. Print by Kay Gould.

In the Name of God: Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. Amen.

“I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” Here God is talking to Noah, in our first reading today from the 9th Chapter of Genesis. God says to Noah, and to all of us who follow, that when we see a rainbow we are to remember that it is a sign for us. This symbolism and the covenant relationship must be both important, and not obvious; for, in this brief passage, it is repeated again and again and again in a variety of ways. It’s as if God is afraid that Noah – and all of us hearing it now – just aren’t going to get what God is trying to say.

Let’s look at the word covenant. In the six sentences of our English translation of this passage, the word covenant appears seven times. That’s right; the word covenant is used seven times in six sentences. Covenant appears in every single sentence, and for good measure, twice in one of them. In three of the seven times, it appears as “my covenant.” Once it appears as “everlasting covenant.” And three times it appears as “sign of the covenant.”

Do you suppose God is trying to get our attention here? Do you suppose that, maybe, with the word covenant, God is trying to say something here to us? I think so!

A covenant is an agreement, a contract. To enter into a covenant is to make a commitment that means an ongoing relationship. It means that both parties are responsible; both parties have to live up to it. It is a sacred.

Here, God alone makes the covenant, asking nothing in return. The commitment is made exclusively on God’s part, and demands nothing of us on the receiving side. I think that a very important point in this is that God, through this covenant, is committing to being in relationship. God calls it an “everlasting covenant.” That means that God commits to this relationship forever. And note to whom God makes this covenant. God promises to be in covenant

with Noah and his offspring (which after the Flood, means all of humanity), and with every animal on the earth. God then clarifies that this means every living creature, for all future generations. And then God clarifies that the covenant is “between me and the earth.” God makes a deal that God is in covenanted relationship with all humanity, with all animals, and even with the earth. The specificity of the breadth of this commitment on God’s part is, I think, very important. God makes this covenant with all humanity, with all animals, and even with the earth.

God makes a covenant; God promises never again to destroy the earth and all life on the earth by the waters of the flood. And three times, in this one passage, God says that the rainbow in the sky will be a sign of that everlasting covenant between God and the earth.

A few years ago, a couple who were friends of ours, adopted a baby and named him Noah. We discovered, in shopping for presents for a few celebrations, that the themes of Noah, the Ark, the animals, and the rainbow provided endless gift possibilities. Michael finally ruled this out for us, saying that little Noah’s room would be wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling arks and animals; his windows enveloped in rainbows sun catchers. As another friend was want to say about such happy situations: “Oh! Isn’t that cute!”

Noah and the Ark can be a heartwarming Sunday School story. And it does have wonderful children’s crafts possibilities.

However, it is crucial for us to remember that there was nothing childish or cute about the Noah and the Ark story. The Flood story is meant to be terrifying. The Flood is about sin and its consequences; that is, wholesale death and destruction. Can you imagine what it would have been like to be in a primitive boat you had made yourself, when the end of the world seemed to be happening outside -- the endless 40 days of rain and surging waters? Or, much, much worse: Can you imagine what it would have been like to be with the hysterical crowds futilely fighting for higher ground as the raging waters rise?

The Flood story tells us that human sin and the fate of the earth are interconnected; it is about how human sin can lead to the destruction of life on earth. The Flood story reminds us of just how delicate the earth and its future are. Individual human beings giving in to temptations -- falling for the seven deadly sins -- affects not only those individuals, but also human society, and all living creatures, and even the earth itself.

The terrifying waters recede. The dove comes back to the Ark carrying an olive branch, showing that plant life has reappeared on the earth. And God tells Noah and his family: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." God makes a covenant; God promises never again to destroy the earth, and all life on the earth, by the waters of the flood.

The rainbow is not cute. The rainbow is a powerful symbol of God-given hope even in the face of the consequences of human sinfulness. Remember those seven deadly sins? Let's see. Since I am quite unaccustomed to them... Ah, yes! Here they are -- I had to write them down here and remind myself by using an acronym: paggels, p-a-g-g-e-l-s. Pride, anger, greed, gluttony, envy, lust, and sloth.

The rainbow is a symbol that God is in covenant with us, with the whole of humanity in all of our diversity, and even with the whole of creation. The rainbow is a symbol that God is connected to us, that God is committed to us. The rainbow is a powerful symbol of God-given hope even in the face of the consequences of human sinfulness; even those consequences all gathered together from across the human family worldwide.

Temptation is real. Sin can present an alluring face to us. That's logical because sin is so very often a good that we try to make a god. God has given each of us many talents that we can develop; we can take pride in achievements. But pride can be our downfall. Food is one of life's delights, but gluttony can kill us. Relaxation renews us, but sloth means we are not thinking and doing what needs to be

done in our service of others. Standing up for values is crucial, but anger can destroy our relationships with others. The examples are countless.

Jesus himself faced temptation. We hear only a bare mention of this in the account from the Gospel according to Mark today. The Gospels according to Matthew and Luke give us more details. Jesus is tempted in ways that relate to who he is, to his gifts, and to how he wants to serve. He is tempted to misuse his tremendous talents, tempted to acquire worldly power, and tempted to doubt God. Jesus overcomes temptation, and in Jesus we are offered strength to do likewise. St. Peter, in his letter today, sees survival in the Ark amid the Flood as prefiguring salvation through the water of baptism. In baptism we join as followers of Jesus in overcoming temptation and serving God by serving those around us.

Look at the world around you. People are alienated from one another. Poverty haunts us, while we spend obscene billions on fighting wars. The greenhouse gases gather above us, and the oceans rise at our feet as the polar ice melts. We seem bent on putting to the test God's promise that the earth won't end in flood... Really, we do seem determined to God to the test on this one! We need commitment to change, to innovation and to persistence. We need to overcome the temptations to do nothing (sloth), to blame someone else (anger), or to expect someone else to pay for it (greed). If we give into the temptation of inaction, those who come after us in this Parish (which is so close to the coast line) could well have this entire interior as the Baptismal Font (some five feet deep) and have to devise floating pews!

God said to Noah: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." The wonderful stained glass detail on the cover of our leaflet today brings a veritable rainbow of dazzling colors to us, right here in this, our worship home. After you have identified that window, let it remind you, every time you see it, of the hope we have because God has made a covenant with us, with all the diverse rainbow of humanity, and with the whole of creation.

Every time you see that window, let it raise a basic question for you: “Where are the rainbows in my life?” Rainbows are a great Biblical sign of hope, but we have to pay attention to see them in the sky. They rarely take up the whole sky, as in this dramatic window. So too, we have to pay attention to notice the rainbows in our lives; we can so easily miss those God-given signs of hope. “Where are the rainbows in my life?”

Let us pray.

Almighty God, come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations, give us strength to overcome the temptations that confront us, and help us to so live that we may shine with the dazzle of the rainbow. Amen.