

A Sermon by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian

Trinity Episcopal Church

7 February 2021

Lent 1B: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

“Change of Mind”

The idea of changing one’s mind seems to have gotten such a bad rap these days, as if it is a sign of weak will or lack of character. We hear in the public discourse all the time, as a kind of accusation – *He once said this, but now he says that, or, She changed position on this.* I understand that motives may vary, but this is also called *learning*, right? As we live and evolve, as we accrue experience, gain perspective, and attain a bit of wisdom, our minds *should* change, yes?

Consider the alternative – to be forever wed to our first opinions? To tune out the input or example of others, to ignore how new information and discovery informs and modifies what we once thought we knew? That is a definition of rigidity, a life without benefit of reflection or contemplation, without applying newfound insight to moments of decision.

By this point, I imagine some of you are thinking, “This is the first Sunday in Lent, so why isn’t she talking about sin and temptation and giving up chocolate? Why all this emphasis on rethinking one’s position or changing one’s mind?”

Because today’s scripture from Genesis is about God doing that very thing – changing a prior position, making a frank change of mind and a new decision (*and it’s a whopper*).

Described as heartbroken that the wholeness of the original creation has been corrupted and perverted by the created, the story goes that God resolves to destroy it all in a great flood, drowning “the earth and all that breathed upon it.” Only those faithful few on the ark were to be spared this terrible fate, ostensibly to begin again and get it right this time.

The brilliance in this story is not about those passengers launching generations of descendants who never corrupt things again. It’s pretty clear *that* didn’t happen. No, the remarkable, timeless wisdom in this story derives from God realizing that change must come not from others but from oneself. *God* imposes a limit, but not on others. Instead, God imposes a *self-limit*, vowing never again to act with a destructive anger.

And God also realizes that a reminder of that covenant may be needed from time to time, and so, a bow is set in the sky for that purpose.

Just think of it: Scripture says that God changed (his) mind, that God is *adaptable, touched to the heart by creation, and willing to accept hurt in order to keep hope alive.*¹ God has learned from experience and has honestly examined the desire for a perfect creation, tempered by a deep love for the created – those same flawed, short-sighted beings who ruined it the first time, and will, undoubtedly, get it wrong again.

And now, perhaps, the connection to Lent is coming through, because this time...

...it is *God* who vows to keep to the Way of Love.

Rather than point elsewhere, rather than become passive, or wait for salvation from others, we must look within and change ourselves. With God as our example, we, too, must promise to keep to the Way of Love. And, we will need reminders of that covenant when *we* fall short or lose *our* way. We will need our own rainbow in the sky, so...

... cue today's Gospel. Long before the church invented Lent, we encounter Jesus having bid farewell to his family, in order to be baptized by John in the Jordan River.

John's message is also about changing minds and new decisions, calling us to frankly examine all the ways we must repent (turn around) and promise to live anew. And there is also water in *this* story – not a destructive wave, but the renewing water of baptism.

As Jesus emerges from that baptismal water, he experiences the Spirit like a dove and hears himself called *Beloved*. He perceives a divine call to breathe, speak, and live the Way of Love with every cell of his being, no matter what the cost. And we know what that cost will come to be.

What will he decide? This is not the decision of a single moment. Scripture gives it a number, 40 days, to convey that Jesus needed time, that his contemplations were deep and soul-searching. The Gospels in various ways describe this as a wilderness time, in which Jesus wrestles with the devil of self-doubt, temptation, and ego – anything which threatens the baptismal vows of justice, mercy, and peace.

And, of course, the church used that same number to create a Lenten season of 40 days, in which *we* are called into deep contemplations of our own, to confront those same devilish whispers in our *own* spirit, to consider and confess how they threaten *our* faithfulness to the Way of Love. Lent can be a time for us to consider, as Jesus did, our worship of a God who is *responsive* to humanity and forgiving in nature, and thereby remaining *unchanged* in faithfulness. It can be a time for us to *offer* others the same grace and forgiveness that we ourselves so dearly need, and are so freely given.

So...will we? Will we examine and recognize our own disappointment and anger? Will we let go of blame and vengeance? No matter how recently or long ago we entered those baptismal waters, will we repent – turn around, change our minds – and give up any position which dishonors or injures God's dream for creation? And will we take *on* and live *into* those baptismal vows, so that the divine kingdom of wholeness, beauty, and goodness will, indeed and finally, prevail upon the earth?

Born in God, visible in Jesus, and blessed by the Spirit, the question for us is whether we will change our minds and change our ways. To make such a change is *not* a sign of weak will or a lack of character. It *is* a sign of insight, humility, integrity, courage, and faith.

I wonder what we will decide...

Amen.

¹ Wm. Loyd Allen. *Feasting on the Word* (Year B)