

1st Sunday of Lent
February 18, 2018
Columbia Congregational Church
Psalm 25:1-10, Genesis 9: 8-17

Covenant
Sermon by the Rev. Betsey Polglase

I have a confession, or perhaps a warning to you, that I have found myself to be in a rage and deep grief since Wednesday's shooting in Parkland Florida. It has been more overpowering than when I heard the news of the shootings in Sandy Hook, or Las Vegas, or the nightclub in Florida, perhaps because of my own journey these last few months. However, my friends it is an outrage that we sit and do nothing after each of these horrendous events that change many people's lives forever. I share the same great outcry against the position that all we can do is pray. If we are sick we certainly can pray that we get better, but we also go to a doctor to cure us of what ails us.

Now I believe that prayer makes a difference in our own lives and in the lives of those we pray for, but it is not going to make the horror go away. I pray for the families, I pray they find their way to living their lives fully in spite of their horrible loss. I believe we need to pray for our enemies and those who perpetrate these horrendous acts of violence against others. Those prayers are short, because in my rage I don't know how to pray for them, but I pray because Jesus told us to. I believe we need to pray for those we have elected, that God brings them to insights that will lead to actions that will help safeguard the innocents and the defenseless, regardless to the expense. I pray for the teachers who now have to help young children practice active shooter drills with the reality that tomorrow it might not be a drill. Is this what we should be teaching our children, that there are people out there that want to kill them; that some people are mentally ill and they will become killers? How unfair to our children and so unfair to people who struggle successfully with their illness! I pray for houses of worship that have to do the same. I guess active shooter events now need to be seen as unlikely yet as possible as a fire.

But all those prayers do not, have not changed, anything. I disagree with those that it is not the time to fight for changes in "our American way of life", that we need to

respect this time of great grief for those families directly affected. Yes, we do need to respect those who grieve, but we do so by making changes so their children did not die for nothing.

To save lives, we passed a law requiring the use of seat belts and enforced it. We have restricted new teen drivers from driving with a group of friends. We say don't drink and drive, don't text and drive, and try to enforce it. Yet we seem unable to respond to the needs of troubled individuals, the need for safety for our children, and the easy availability of these weapons of mass destruction.

So then I am reading this morning's scripture. And I prayed Psalm 25 ²O my God, in you I trust; ⁴Make me to know your ways, O GOD; teach me your paths. ⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. ⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O GOD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old." Indeed, I thought, my soul longs for instruction. How do I move on?

I read the passage from Genesis again and again. Where is hope and peace? The story is of God's despair over humanities seeming desire to return to the chaos from which they were created. "And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (6:5-6). So the Lord decided to blot out his own creation...except for Noah who was a righteous man. So Noah was instructed to build that mighty ark and fill it with some of every living thing created by God, but just enough of each to start over and populate the earth anew.

You know the story: forty days and nights of rain destroying everything that was not on the Ark. Then God sent a great wind over the earth, and the waters subsided. Finally, after many days, a dove sent out of the ark came back with a live leaf, indicating that dry land and plant life had been found. And God told Noah to go with his family and all the living things on the ark to go out onto the dry land.

The surprising thing is that God, who brought into existence all creation and also chose to destroy all but a remnant, now makes an astonishing promise. The God of the ancient world was all-powerful and just, quick to judge. But this omnipotent God chooses to relinquish his right to destroy God's creation ever again. He symbolically hangs up his bow in the sky.

“The rainbow symbolizes not only peace (no more destruction) but hope as well, and that is how a community of faith must live: in hope. ‘Hope, the expectation that things will get better, not only gets us through the difficult times but also gives us strength to work proactively in the interest of a just and peaceful world....’”¹

The central message of this first covenant that God makes with humankind needs to be lifted up today, this first Sunday of reflection on how we live our lives, and this Sunday after another horrible shooting. This first covenant is a beautiful moment of reconciliation and peace. Even in the worst chaos we can depend on God to offer steadfast love and hope. We then partner with the Creator through patient, forgiving, loving, and prophetic action”²

We call this story, which we read a part of today, the story of Noah and the Ark, but it is more importantly the story of God and God’s love for God’s creation. God surrenders God’s power in order to be in relationship with us. The ancient Hebrews understood that the one true God is “inherently self-giving, willing to enter a relationship that puts limits on even God’s prerogatives.”³ The rainbow is a reminder to God, not us. God vows never to pick up the bow again against humankind. The rainbow hung up in the sky reminds God to do what so many parents do, take a deep breath and proceed with patience to find “another way to deal with disobedient or wayward human beings.”⁴

God is present to us and waiting for us to call for wisdom and courage and strength to find ways to care for each other the way God cares for us. Not only are we required “to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God,” as the prophet Micah says, we are also to follow Jesus’ instruction to care compassionately with one another as if that person were Jesus (Mat. 25: 31-46). And I understand that to mean we need to set our priorities on caring for those who are troubled, educate ourselves and our children to be compassionate and caring to everyone, and to put the lives of others over any other personal gain.

¹ Kathryn M Matthews, Weekly Seeds quoting Nicole L. Johnson).

² Jane Anne Ferguson, Feasting On The Word p 30)

³ David J. Lose, Feasting on the Word, p 29).

⁴ Homiletics/February 2018, p 66).

God so loved the world that through this first Covenant God limited his own power over the created beings to allow for a caring relationship with God's people. Through the Covenant, God's love prevails so that we can live in hope.

Thanks be to God. Amen