

Sermon Notes from CMJ
First Sunday in Lent - Year B

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

Introduction - This Sunday starts the first full week of Lent, which began on Ash Wednesday. Lent is an important time for many Christians, although the significance of Lent has probably reduced for many church communities in recent years. Traditionally Lent is a time to reflect, to prepare, to abstain (often linked to fasting), and to serve. In some ways, there is a connection between Lent and the Days of Awe (10 days of repentance and renewal, beginning on the Jewish New Year and leading up to the Day of Atonement) within the Jewish liturgical calendar.

Common Theme - The four lectionary readings are all linked, to some degree, with new beginnings. The Genesis reading tells of the covenant God made with Noah. This marks a new beginning based on a promise to all of creation (Gen 9:17). The psalmist (David) is seeking a new beginning as he seeks the Lord to show him the right paths he should take (Ps 25:4). In 1 Peter the teaching is given about how we begin to live a “new life” in the Messiah – a life which is based on who the Messiah is and what he has done, specifically his atoning death (1 Pet 3:18) and His resurrection (1 Pet 3:21). Finally, the gospel reading tells of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and the proclaiming of the good news with the words “the time has come” (Mark 1:15).

Hebraic Perspective - We give glory to God for all the good things that occur in our lives, as we should, and we often blame the devil for all the bad things. However, it is really not that simple. Sometimes God does lead us into hard difficult places. The good news is he always gets us out of them too. God sends Noah into the ark and the flood; David is surrounded by enemies; Jesus descends to the realm of the dead (a place he had never been to before), and God brings Jesus to the wilderness. All three Synoptic Gospels report that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. He did not wander there of his own free will, and Satan did not entice him to come. However, the enemy did meet him there. We do have an enemy (Satan) who, while originally residing in heaven, does not dwell there any longer. Revelation 12 reminds us that Michael has thrown him out and cast him down. In the Gospel passage, we find him in the desert. Full of rage and hate, he continues to try to undo the plans of God, his Maker.

First Reading: Genesis 9:8-17 - If one is looking for a theme which “holds together” the whole of the biblical narrative, a prime contender would be the theme of covenant. The major covenants in the Old Testament begin here with the covenant God makes with Noah (and his descendants and all living creatures). This is an unconditional promise of God never to destroy all life with some “natural” catastrophe. The sign of this covenant is the rainbow.

Other key covenants that follow on from this point of beginning are the covenant with Abraham (Gen 15, 17), the Sinai covenant (Exod 19-24), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7), and the new covenant (Jer 31).

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Noah is described as a righteous man. Some rabbinic traditions understand this to mean that Noah was an exceptionally good man even in his generation of evil-doers, while others argue that Noah's righteousness was only relative when compared with the evil of his generation. Either way, God remembers Noah (Gen 8:1) and blesses Noah (Gen 9:1). Also in rabbinic tradition, it is taught that seven laws were given first to Adam and then these laws were given to Noah. These are known as the Noahide laws, which can be seen as a "Torah for the nations" in contradistinction with the full Torah which will be given as part of the Sinai covenant to Israel.

In Genesis 10 we see that all the nations (70 in total) are descended from Noah's sons. Therefore after the destruction of the flood, Noah replaces Adam as the "father of all humanity."

Second Reading: Psalm 25:1-10 - This psalm is David's personal lament before God. It is a lament which many of us will be able to identify with. He longs for deliverance from his enemies (v. 1-3), for guidance (v. 4) and for forgiveness (v. 7).

The theme of covenant is picked up again within this psalm (v. 10). David has confidence as he prays, confidence not in himself but confidence rooted in God's covenantal blessings – blessings of deliverance, pardon, guidance, and love. In all of this David sees that the LORD is good (v. 7). To understand that the LORD is good, that He is for you and not against you is the foundation for all true repentance and for all new beginnings.

Third Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22 - In the Genesis text we encounter the "righteousness" of Noah, but here in the first letter of Peter we encounter the righteousness of the Messiah, the one who died to make atonement for the unrighteous (v. 18). This understanding of the atoning death of the Messiah for the unrighteous is at the very heart of new covenant teaching. See for example Romans 3:21-26, 2 Corinthians 5:21, and Hebrews 10.

The verses of 1 Peter 3:19-20 have been interpreted in a number of ways, and there is much dispute over how best these verses should be understood. In Christian theology, there are three main lines of interpretation, all of which may be helpful, but all in my mind have a degree of weakness within them, and all lines will raise important (and probably difficult!) follow-up questions.

- Line 1 sees that Jesus Christ in his pre-incarnate state went to and ministered to and through Noah in order to reach out to the people of Noah's generation.
- Line 2 sees that between his death and resurrection Jesus Christ went to the place of the dead and preached to (or declared the victory of judgement to) the "spirits" of Noah's contemporaries.
- Line 3 sees that between His death and resurrection Jesus Christ went to the place where fallen angels are kept and preached to (or declared the victory of judgement over) them. These fallen angels are those who left their angelic state and had sexual relations with human women (see Gen 6:1-4, 2 Pet 2:4-5 and Jude 6).

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The key point to make in verse 21 is that we are saved by what baptism symbolises – namely the Messiah’s death and resurrection. Here the reality and the symbolism are so closely related that the symbol is sometimes used to proclaim the reality. In this regard see Romans 6:3-10.

Fourth Reading: Mark 1:9-15 - The gospel reading from Mark tells the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. This ministry began when Jesus was about 30 years of age. The baptism (perhaps this can be understood within the context of a special ritual bath – *mikvah* – or anointing) marks the beginning of this ministry which will be marked by proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (v. 14-15), healing (including deliverance), teaching, and calling of disciples (v. 16-20). Immediately following the baptism a voice from heaven is heard (v. 10-11). Here in this solemn yet joyful moment of affirmation, we glimpse into the triune nature of God – the Father speaks, the Son is baptised, and the Holy Spirit descends.

Prior to the commencement of the public ministry, there is a time of preparation/testing in the desert. The period of this desert testing is 40 days (this has connections with the timing of Lent). This desert (wilderness) time is far more than a spiritual retreat; it is a place of significant spiritual warfare (see Matt 4:1-11 for a fuller account), a place of conflict and struggle. The desert becomes the place of preparation (Isa 40:3). At the heart of this testing for Jesus is the issue of his unique identity as God’s Son (Matt 4:3, 6), and this of course was the very issue confirmed earlier by the voice from heaven.

Hebraic Context: The wilderness is lonely, dangerous, and in Jewish tradition the abode of demons. According to Jewish tradition, the instigator of the angelic rebellion in Genesis 6 was Azazel. He too was defeated by Michael and imprisoned in the desert. Leviticus 16 commands the Israelites to send the Yom Kippur goat with the sins of the people out to the desert to Azazel. The desert was the place of bandits and wild animals, lacking in life-sustaining food and water. In Jewish tradition, the desert was no place for humans for evil lurked in its wild lands. Yet it is towards the enemy that God sends his heroes and his Messiah. It’s a paradox. In the quiet lonely place, yet at the same time a place of difficulty and danger, God can speak and we can hear. The sacred history of Israel records that the LORD “led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble you and test you in order to know what was in your heart” (Deut 8:2).

The good news is that while we seem to be alone in the desert, we are truly not. Attended by angels, guided by God, and in the presence of his Spirit, we can learn and grow. We can overcome the lies of the enemy and listen to God. We can discover more of the truth about ourselves and our relationship with our God and King. The desert experience does end, and it ends with the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven.

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About the author - The Rev. Alex Jacob is a United Reformed Church minister ordained in 1985. He led three church congregations in the UK before beginning ministry with CMJ in 2006. He is the CEO of CMJ UK and has pioneered key evangelism and advocacy work. He has written a range of theological and devotional books; the most recent is a commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. Alex holds a master of arts degree in pastoral theology and a master of philosophy research degree. His research interests focus on knowing Jesus in his Jewish context and the theology of election with reference to Romans 9-11. Alex has ministered in many contexts and has travelled widely. He is married to Mandy, and they have three adult children: Luke, Emily, and Ben.