

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Lent 1B, Sunday, February 22, 2015  
Genesis 9:8-17

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

What are you giving up for Lent? This is the question that has echoed in the air recently as we turn a page on our ecclesial and liturgical season. It's interesting to me that in our increasingly multi-faith and primarily secular culture, "giving something up for Lent" remains in the collective memory and practice. It's not as strong as it once was, but I can still hear people who aren't currently active in a faith community or who have only tenuous connections to Christianity talk about it. It shows, I think, something of the hunger, mostly latent hunger perhaps, but still a desire for spiritual practice that has a meaningful impact on real lives. Maybe it's the desperate hunger for greater simplicity in our complicated world or maybe it's the need for rest and reflection from the never-ending pressures of life. Whatever it is, there seems to be a broad recognition that there is a gift at the heart of giving something up for Lent.

The gift in it for us this morning is the example of giving something up that God offers through covenantal promise. It comes to us from the primordial history in Genesis... from after that terrible time of destruction and death due to flood... when God takes the time to reflect on what happened. You see after God made humanity as the pinnacle of all creation, life didn't go as planned. People refused to behave as God has intended, as God had desired, and when God "saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually," (6:5) God chose to send a flood to destroy everything. But when it was all over, and God surveyed the damage, God didn't say: "see you deserved it, you ingrates!" God didn't relish in the death and destruction. Instead, God said in God's own heart: "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." (8:21)

God's observation of the inclination of the human heart, and the human behaviour that would presumably result, hadn't changed. What had changed was God's response. With a commitment first in the Divine heart and now with words of promise spoken today, God makes a covenant with all of creation through Noah: "As for me," God says, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." (9:9-11) With this post-flood promise, God gave up wholesale destruction of creation. Instead, God initiated and established a covenant that obligates God alone, unilaterally and unconditionally, to remember and to be faithful. As one commentator describes: "God establishes it in goodness and love and upholds it in eternal faithfulness. It will never need to be renewed; it stands forever, regardless of what people do. Humans can just rest in the arms of this promise." (NIB, 400) And so God has committed to staying in relationship with us, no matter what we do. No matter how much we

break God's heart, no matter how badly we treat one another, no matter what evil we harbour in our hearts, no matter what... God chooses to stay in relationship with us. "Never again," God says, "shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

This is my favourite of the covenants because this promise of God means that we never need to fear that we must toe the line, or believe certain doctrine, or cover off some holy "to-do" list, to get in or to stay in God's good books. This covenant means that this penitential season of Lent we're entering isn't to make God feel better, or somehow manipulate God into liking us more... it isn't really about God at all. God has already decided to choose mercy and grace in relationship to us no matter what. Rather, Lent is about our need to deepen our own self-discipline, to examine our lives to decide what options we need to take off the table, and to draw nearer to God not out of fear that God might destroy, but because God has already decided that isn't an option. Lent is about following God's example of self-discipline and self-limiting how we will choose to be in relationship - with God, with one another, with creation and even with ourselves. Beginning Lent with this first of God's covenant's serves to remind us that ultimate power has chosen love and mercy as the guide, and implores us to do the same. God gave up the power to wantonly destroy after the flood. For the sake of love and mercy, what are you willing to give up?

In the book *Good to Great* about organizational transformation, author Jim Collins describes the need for disciplined people, disciplined thought and disciplined action. Among the hardest of disciplined actions is the "stop-doing" list. Collins writes: "Most of us lead busy but undisciplined lives. We have ever-expanding 'to do' lists, trying to build momentum by doing, doing, doing—and doing more. And it rarely works. Those who buil[d] good-to-great companies... make as much use of 'stop doing' lists as 'to do' lists.' My advice? Pick a single, unproductive thing that's wasting your time and stop doing it today. Eliminate something else tomorrow. You'll be trimming away stress at the same time." End quote.

One of the points of Lent is to trim away, to stop doing, to give up, those things that are killing us, and the people around us. The challenge of creating "stop-doing" lists rather than "to do" lists runs counter to the "more is better" culture all around us and yet I suspect its also the attraction of embracing a Lenten practice. And so this Lent I encourage you to give something up, to stop doing, something that is causing you stress, wasting your time or creating heartache... Stop trying to keep up with the Jones'. Stop working over-time for extra cash when you can get by just fine on your base salary. Stop the volunteer commitment or extra-curricular activity that no longer holds meaning for you. Stop trying to control people in your life who just want to be loved for who they are. Stop shopping and instead eat everything in your cupboards and deep freezes. Stop worrying about things over which you have no control. Turn off your cell phone, your Blackberry, or your I-phone. Stop frivolous spending and give the money to an organization that is changing the world. Stop clinging to a grudge or a grief and release it to God's care. Stop fighting and find a solution to the interpersonal conflict that is causing pain and heartache. This week, courageously consider what it is that is killing you... and stop doing it, or stop holding it, this Lent.

In making the covenant promise in Genesis 9, God gave up the option to destroy all the earth in a flood. That's not to say that there would never again be judgements, trials or silence, but it would not be ultimate annihilation or everlasting destruction. Years later, when the worst

had happened to the people of Israel with Jerusalem overtaken and the Temple destroyed, the prophet Isaiah reminded the grieving exiles that God's silence would not be forever: "For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer." (54:6-8) The Lord our God uses the ultimate Divine power to endure the suffering of broken relationship with us, come what may. God made the choice, the promise, of self-discipline and covenant love to guide the God-ward side of the relationship. Years later, Jesus came to earth, to incarnate God's own broken heart and to show us again God's ultimate power to suffer for the cause of abundant and everlasting life.

May we strive this lent to follow God's example by also choosing self-discipline in love over power that destroys. May we stop-doing whatever is killing us, so that our time, our souls, our wallets and our talents are freed for what really matters, for the abundant and everlasting life God has chosen for us. May we have a holy Lent in preparation for the glory of resurrection.