

## THE RAINBOW PROMISE

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Let me ask you a Lenten question, how is your relationship with God? This is a rhetorical question, of course, and one that you probably can't answer immediately without contemplation and perhaps can't really answer at all with any accuracy. Nonetheless it is a question to answer for yourself during Lent. What is it like between you and God these days?

Life is a journey. Faith is a journey. I'm fond of this image of the journey and often we liken Lent to a journey too, a small journey which encapsulates and mirrors our journey of faith. Journeys are not always smooth. They have their ups and downs, their mountain peaks and valleys, and the flat runs between. And sometimes it leaves us wondering about God and our relationship with God.

New people to the Christian faith usually begin with excitement, a sense of discovery and elation. Their entry into the Christian church and a relationship with Christ is a mountaintop experience. Inevitably, however, they discover that the Christian life is not a bed of roses, or if it is it still has the thorns on it. Everyone experiences from time to time a dry period in our prayer life. Everyone who takes the time to think about our faith and to ponder the Bible comes to questions we cannot answer, important questions, disturbing questions, ones we want and need answers to. Often the institutional church and the people in it disappoint when we are seen with all our foibles, all our warts and scars, despite our faith. When the experience of faith is new and fresh but not yet strong, hardy and enduring it can be difficult and sometimes we wonder about this God and this Jesus and this Holy Spirit, and we might be tempted to cut the journey short.

Challenges come also, though, at the other end of the

spectrum of life. I remember visiting a woman in a nursing home, a friend of my great-aunt, a woman approaching a hundred. We had many good visits, but her life was limited and she wondered aloud, "Why doesn't the Lord take me? I'm ready to go. Has the Lord forgotten about me?"

She had an answer to that. "Perhaps God wants me to be a friend to that cantankerous old woman up the hall," she said. But still she asked the question at the end of her lifelong faithful journey.

And think as well about those who thought they were midway in their journey but are confronted with a premature end. I remember visiting a middle-aged woman who was dying and how we recalled her past. We laughed. Smiles were plentiful. But we also remembered her regrets, the things that she wished she had not done but could never take back. She wanted to ask me a question, a question about God and guilt and dying but she couldn't manage to find the words, at least she couldn't say them. So, I asked the question for her, "Are you wondering whether your illness and your dying are a punishment from God for what you have done?" She nodded, "Yes."

Ups and downs, challenges, questions and doubts, dry times, are all a part of life and a part of the faith journey. We all have times when our world is flooded beyond our control, and we feel threatened. We all have wilderness times when our spiritual reservoirs are depleted, and external resources seem lacking. Even Jesus did.

Every year for the first Sunday of Lent the Gospel lesson is the story of Jesus in the wilderness and his temptations. Matthew and Luke describe the event in some detail but Mark, which is the version I used today, is much briefer but in some ways more dramatic. Jesus was baptized. It was a landmark time, a mountaintop experience. "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased," a voice spoke from beyond.

But then immediately the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Only Mark uses the adverb "immediately" and the verb used here is very strong. It's the same one used to describe

Jesus casting out demons. There is real force in it. That same Spirit who descended as a gentle dove drove Jesus, cast him out into the wilderness and there he was tempted by Satan.<sup>i</sup>

The wilderness experience is normal. It is to be expected, not just because of what life is, but also because the Spirit drives us there. God not only doesn't shield us from life's challenges; God drives us into the wilderness.

As every parent knows you cannot shield your children from life. It stunts their growth. A parent who locks their child in a room away from the world would be charged with a heinous crime. We need the wilderness experiences to grow. We need the dry spells, the times of overwhelming floods, the doubts, the challenges, the uncertainties, and we need to deal with them and to overcome them and to move on. God will not shield us from them. God sends us forth to meet them, to live there, but God does not desert us. God tells us that we are loved and sends us forth not alone but with God.

Now the wilderness, your wilderness, can be anywhere. For Jesus a garden, the garden of Gethsemane, would later become another wilderness where he was tempted and asked God to remove from him the cup, the cup of his suffering and death. But he did not give in to temptation. "Yet not what I will, but what you will," he prayed.<sup>ii</sup>

In a Bible study group in Sing Sing prison, which is "up the river" from New York City, an inmate commented that he always imagined the wilderness in which the temptations took place as being back on the streets in New York with temptation bumping up against you at every corner.<sup>iii</sup> Eventually in order for him to grow, in order for him to be truly free, he will need to confront those temptations, to live in his wilderness, and to overcome it.

For those in the wilderness I find good news in the Rainbow Promise found in the story of a flood.<sup>iv</sup> You all know the story of the flood and Noah, his family and animals two by two, and the ark.<sup>v</sup> Perhaps you can't remember the details, but you know the story. What we have at the end of that story is God's first covenant with God's people. Indeed, this first covenant is with *all*

people, and not just people, it is with all creation.

What is this covenant? God hangs up God's bow, not some romantic, pretty, awesome image to admire, but rather the weapon of war.

The reason for the flood in the first place was that God saw that human wickedness was great. It grieved God and God was sorry for having created humankind. So, God decided to destroy the world except for a remnant from which God would start over. But when the waters receded God saw that nothing had changed. "The imagination of the human heart is evil from youth," God said. Humankind had not changed and so God did. It was up to God and so God changed. God hung up the bow. God will never again be the enemy. Never again could God be provoked no matter how provocative our behaviour might be. God will not be timeless and immune to the flow of human events. Rather God will remember us and in remembering will be there for us. It is not as Browning wrote, "God's in His heaven -/ All's right with the world!"<sup>vi</sup> But rather, "God's here with us and therefore all's right with the world!"

God ordains reliability in nature and requires the valuing of human life as an absolute.<sup>vii</sup> Never again will creation nor human life be taken by God. Certainly, there may be, indeed there will be, suffering, death and destruction but these are not from God. They are not rooted in God's anger or rejection. Contrary to the wording of insurance policies, they are not acts of God. The one-to-one connection between sin and guilt, and divine punishment is broken.

To that dying woman who wondered whether her disease was a punishment from God I answered, "No. God doesn't work that way. When Jesus was asked about a man born blind who sinned this man or his parents, Jesus said, Neither."<sup>viii</sup> God doesn't work that way."

Yet even Jesus would question it from the wilderness of the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"<sup>ix</sup> God had not forsaken him but even in death gave him the victory.

Do you know what I find marvelous about this first covenant? Its uniqueness. It is marvelously unique and amazingly gracious, because, you see, it is one-sided. In the covenant with Noah, Noah has no part in it, no role to play, no obligation. Certainly, there will be other covenants, with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses, even one written on our heart in Jeremiah, other covenants where there are expectations of us, implications, a role. But here the covenant is unilateral. It is God's unsolicited promise.

In a wedding service when a marriage covenant is entered by two people we ask a legal question, Do either of you know of any lawful impediment why you should not be married? In one wedding resource I sometimes used that question ends with this statement, "For unless your marriage is based upon mutual honesty and trust and love, your marriage will not be successful and you will not receive the blessing of God." I always strike the last part of that sentence, namely, "You will not receive the blessing of God," because I don't believe it. It don't believe that God's blessing is dependent upon our human disposition. God's blessing is based upon God's love and God's graciousness. It is free and undeserved and although I believe firmly that every marriage needs mutual honesty and trust and love to prosper, God's blessing is independent of that. You can count on God. God won't hold back.

Just so is it in all of life. You can count on that first covenant with God and so you can count on God. To those who question even doubt their faith, do that, struggle with it, but do not doubt God. To those at the end of their lives who wonder whether God had forgotten them, do not doubt that God remembers you and cares for you. To those facing unfair death and unjust suffering, rail against it but trust God.

Remember God's Rainbow Promise. Remember God's last words, "I will remember my covenant." Live in the light of that promise as you walk your journey of faith, especially during the wilderness times.

During Lent, examine your relationship with God, return to

God, renew your relationship with God, enter into spiritual practices and live in such a way that your life wouldn't make sense if God did not exist. And as you live in that light others will see and come to understand the promise as well.

...I do not need some tremendous miracle  
To give me faith in God:  
A violet would do,  
Or a spire of goldenrod,  
Or a daisy or two.  
But if I had to have  
A magic and a wonder  
To rend my doubts asunder,  
To prove God true –  
That would be you!<sup>x</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 1: 1: 9-13.

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 14: 32-42.

<sup>iii</sup> Related by Michael Cowan, Katonah United Methodist Church, Katonah, NY in the *Midrash* Internet discussion group.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 8: 20 – 9: 17

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 6: 5 – 9: 17.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Browning, "Pippa's Song."

<sup>vii</sup> Genesis 8: 22; 9: 5-6.

<sup>viii</sup> John 9.

<sup>ix</sup> Mark 15: 34.

<sup>x</sup> Archibald Rutledge, "To the One I Love," *The Power of Love* (ed. Guideposts), (Inspirational Press 1995), p. 369.