Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

*A Lenten Journey*

Are you ready? Catch your breath because Mark moves at a pretty fast clip! We’ve just entered the season of Lent and Mark wants to move us right along – from baptism to wilderness temptations to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry all in 7 short verses. Is it Mark or Jesus who seems in such a hurry? There are a few interesting features along the way. For instance, when Jesus is baptized, we read that Jesus saw the heavens “torn open” and a voice declares him “my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”. From the way it is written, it seems that message was directed to Jesus alone. It seems he’s barely out of the water when the Spirit *immediately* drives him into the wilderness. We aren’t told much about that wilderness experience except that he’s there forty days (a long time), tempted by Satan and he’s with wild beasts and ministered to by angels. There is no detail about what Satan is up to with him. Details like that are in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke but we are left to imagine what forty days in the wilderness might be like. It’s not as if Jesus heads into this wilderness equipped with his Boy Scout backpack or whatever equipment he might deem necessary. We’re not even given any sense of the temptations he will face. All we are really sure of is that God, who has declared him ‘beloved’ will be with him.

As I was thinking about what that wilderness might be like, I began to think about the wildernesses of our lives. In many ways, navigating this pandemic has been a wilderness experience. It has challenged us to find the resources we need to navigate social distancing as well as discerning what precautions we need to take to be safe. Add to the pandemic other kinds of emergencies like the one currently affecting much of the South. When the systems we rely on fail us where do we turn? Sometimes I think we find inner resources that we might not have recognized in ourselves before, and sometimes we can turn to other people.

Native Americans have a tradition of sending their young men out for a “vision quest”. It’s a time for both an outward test and an inward passage of self-encounter. It’s a way of determining one’s fitness or preparation for adulthood. In Mark’s story, the mention of forty days may be meant to evoke the memory of the Israelites days of wandering in the wilderness or the duration of the flood in Noah’s time. So Jesus, like his ancestors must struggle in the wilderness to discern what this vocation he’s been called to means. The wilderness thus becomes a place of discovering one’s identity.

Just like young Native Americans, I believe Jesus had grown up with a whole treasure trove of stories about our ancestors in faith. One of those foundational stories would have been about Noah and the great flood. I think it was Frederick Buechner who said those old tales are about us, and I suppose that is why we can never altogether forget them; that is why, even if we do not read them anymore ourselves, we give them to children to read so that they will never be entirely lost. I wonder how many church nurseries are decorated with pictures of Noah’s ark and all the animals? But do we tell those stories completely? I mean, do we say that the reason for the great flood was that God was very angry with people and decided to wipe them all out except for a small remnant?

As I read that story again, I thought about the ways we often want to solve problems. I’m remembering early days on the school board when we were trying to figure out the best ways to deal with student discipline. The first impulse was to be stern and take away privileges. But, beyond that not working well, we learned about restorative justice practices. What I loved in this story is that God changed! I had grown up with an idea that God never changed – but this story says something different. Not only did God promise to never wipe out the whole world with a flood again, but God makes a wonderful covenant – not just with Noah, but with all creatures – all humanity. Even though Mark doesn’t tell us, I believe stories like the one about Noah were stories Jesus knew. They must have helped him know of God’s great love for us – and forgiveness too.

Buechner has more to say about this story: “the tale of Noah tells other truths as well. The ark is wherever people come together because this is a stormy world where nothing stays put for long among the crazy waves and where at the end of every voyage there is a burial at sea. The ark is where, just because it is such a world, we really need each other and know very well that we do. The ark is wherever human beings come together because in their heart of hearts all of them – dream the same dream, which is a dream of peace – peace between nations, between races, between the brothers (and sisters) – and thus ultimately a dream of love. Love, not as an excuse for the mushy and innocuous, but love as a summons to battle against all that is unlovely and unloving in the world. The ark, in other words, is where we have each other and where we have hope.” (from the Hungering Dark)

In his time in the wilderness, how was Jesus shaped for the ministry before him? As we make our Lenten Journey, may we tap into the stories and traditions of our faith to help us make our way through the challenges of our days.