

Repentance and Hope

By **Veronica Roberts Ogle, PhD**

February 21, 2021 – First Sunday of Lent

Readings: Genesis 9.8-15; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.12-15

On this first Sunday of Lent, the Church has given us a set of readings that speak clearly of God's good will towards us and show us the spirit in which we must enter this time of repentance; this is a spirit that recalls the words spoken through the Prophet Jeremiah: "I know well the plans I have in mind for you, plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope" (Jer 2.11).

A Sign for All Ages to Come

In the Old Testament reading, we hear about God's covenant with Noah in the aftermath of the flood. Promising that He will never again wipe out creation in a state of anger, God vows: "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings." Of course, God hardly needs a reminder to help him refrain from destroying his creation: God does not forget, just as He was never angry, and just as He never needed to repent of this anger. This being so, why must the Scriptures speak of God in a way that seems misleading? What is the point?

With this question in mind, it is helpful to turn to Augustine, a Church Father who mounted a defense against those who would discount the Old Testament for its anthropomorphic depiction of God. For Augustine, the anthropomorphism of the Old Testament is, at bottom, a sign of God's mercy: a foreshadowing of the Incarnation, it bears witness to God's perpetual desire to meet us where we are. Drawing on 1 Cor 3.2, he frequently tells his flock that human beings are too fleshly for the solid food of wisdom that nourishes the angels; we require the milk of infants for our spiritual nourishment, this milk being Christ Incarnate. Extending the metaphor in *On The Trinity*, he explains that "holy scripture, adapting itself to babes, did not shun any words, proper to any kind of thing whatever, that might nourish our understanding and enable it to rise up to the sublimities of divine things. Thus it . . . transposed many words to signify what was not in fact like that, but had to be expressed like that; 'I am a jealous God' (Exod 20.5) for example, and 'I am sorry I made man' (Gen 6.7)" (*On the Trinity*, 1.2). God, in other words, was never sorry that He made us, but the Scriptures had to express it in that way for the spiritual benefit of the sinner.

Against those who think that the God of the Old Testament is vindictive, therefore, Augustine frequently argues that the Scriptures speak of God's anger in order to reveal the destructiveness of sin to the sinner, much in the same way that a wise father raises his voice to rebuke his son without actually losing his temper (e.g. *Expositions of the Psalms*, 78.8). During his discussion of the flood, for example, he writes: "The anger of God is not a disturbing emotion of His mind, but a judgment by which punishment is inflicted upon sin. His thought and reconsideration also are the unchangeable reason which changes things; for He does not, like man, repent of anything He has done, because in all matters His decision is as inflexible as His prescience is certain. But if Scripture were not to use such expressions as the above, it would not familiarly insinuate itself into the minds of all classes of men, whom it seeks access to for their good,

that it may alarm the proud, arouse the careless, exercise the inquisitive, and satisfy the intelligent; and this it could not do, did it not first stoop, and in a manner descend, to them where they lie" (*City of God*, 15.25).

Approaching the flood and its aftermath in this light, it becomes clear that the story cannot mean that God became angry with mankind such that his anger later abated and he regretted it. Rather, it must be interpreted in light of the constancy of God's salvific will, which seeks to alarm the proud and arouse the careless, that it might bring about true repentance in us. Indeed, God does not will our destruction, but our salvation, and always has willed it. The Old Testament bears witness to this, if it is read in the light of Christ. Take, for example, Abraham's conversation with God before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18.22-32): "Would you spare the city for 50 righteous souls? For 40? 20? 10?" "For the sake of the ten," the Lord tells Abraham, "I will not destroy it" (Gen 18.32). But, what if there were only one? While Abraham does not ask the question, we cannot help but conclude that God's answer, all along, is "yes": "For the sake of the Righteous One, I will spare the whole world, if souls but believe in Him."

This being so, the story of the flood begins to emerge in a different light: the flood becomes a sign of the *intrinsic* destructiveness of sin—for the wages of sin *is* death (Rom 6.23)—and the ark becomes a foreshadowing of God's rescue mission. In fact, reading the story of the flood in light of our second reading breaks open the mystery of what was going on all along, for Noah and his family were "saved through water," a water that prefigured baptism (1 Pet 3.20-21). Ultimately, the waters of the flood signify not death, but life.

In Order that He Might Lead You to God

Turning to 1 Peter, we encounter the good news: Christ suffered for our salvation and stands at the right hand of God in victory over sin and death. Importantly, we also read that Christ "went to preach to the spirits in prison who had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah . . ." (1 Pet 19-20). While scholars using the historical critical method argue otherwise, this passage has traditionally been interpreted as referring to the Harrowing of Hell, Christ's triumphant descent to the underworld in order to release its prisoners. Imagining this moment, a preacher in the early Church delivered a striking sermon that has been preserved in the Office of Readings for Holy Saturday. In it, the triumphant Christ greets those in chains, exclaiming, "I am your God who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell."

God did not create us to be held a prisoner in hell; considering that this speech is directed at those very souls who had sinned in the days of Noah, it becomes strikingly apparent that God's plan for our salvation includes the salvation of those who perished in the Flood—and that it was already in the works. This is the meaning of God's patience, another anthropomorphism designed to nourish the faithful, for it communicates that God's saving will is enacted in the story of salvation history. In light of Christ, it becomes clear that the destructiveness of the flood was never the last word, even if it was the intrinsic outcome of human sinfulness. For this reason, it is well that we return to the first reading after being reminded that the sign God offers mankind in the rainbow is nothing other than an expression of His perpetual good will towards us—a sign designed to draw us nearer to God in gratitude and in confidence, since, far from wanting to destroy us, God is a shepherd who "shows sinners the way" and "guides the humble to justice" (Ps 25.8-9).

Thus, as we think about these Scripture passages in the context of our Lenten season, the message that emerges is that God greatly desires our repentance and seeks to draw it out of us by showing that the wages of sin truly is death. This is why the Scriptures speak of God's anger. And yet, we should also take heart because God's last word is Christ Incarnate: the Righteous One who suffers for the unrighteous, so that He might lead us to God (1 Pet 3.18). Examining our sins in this light, we are invited not to inhabit a destructive anger that we mistakenly consider to be God-like, but rather to dwell on the patience of God, remembering that baptism is not like "a removal of dirt from the body but an appeal to God for a clear conscience" (1 Pet 3.21). That is to say, we are not invited to violently scrub ourselves clean (as if we were ever capable of making ourselves clean), but to prostrate ourselves before the God who makes repentance possible, for it is God who will remove our stony hearts and give us natural hearts, God who will put His spirit within us *so that* we can walk in His statutes and observe His decrees (Ezek 36.26-7).

This is the Time of Fulfillment

In today's Gospel, we have the shortened account of Jesus' temptation in the desert, followed by the dramatic announcement: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1.15). As the second reading reveals, this gospel, this good news, is that Christ has forged the way back to God. Now, Christ asks us to repent and believe that He is the Way. Rooting our repentance in this belief, we can truly say with the Psalmist, "Good and upright is the Lord, thus he shows sinners the way" (Ps 25.8). Enduring the same temptations that weigh us down, as He does in today's Gospel passage, the Righteous One fulfills this declaration. Suffering for us while we were yet sinners (Rom 5.8), He baptizes us into his death and resurrection (Rom 6.4)—a baptism that is both our plea to be given a clear conscience and God's response: "I have done it and will do it." If we can remember this reality this Lent, our repentance will not be a frightened vow to shape up, but a hopeful petition to be made clean. That is to say, if we can root our repentance in gratitude and in confidence, we will come to see how true it is that God's ways are love and truth to those who keep His covenant (Ps 25.10). May this recognition bear the fruit of true contrition in our lives.

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Further Reading

- *[An Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday: The Lord's Descent into Hell](#)*
- *Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, [Sacrament for Constant Conversion](#)*
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church [##976-987](#)*

In Short . . .

- *God does not will our destruction, but our salvation.*
- *The Old Testament speaks of God's anger in order to teach sinners about the intrinsic destructiveness of sin.*
- *Repentance must be rooted in fear of the Lord, but a mature fear of the Lord is steeped in gratitude, for Christ Himself has forged the path that will bring us back to God.*