

Sermon: All the Paths of the Lord

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

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Based on **Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10**

Believe it or not, these two readings are complementary. Each includes elements of redemption and forgiveness, trust and commitment.

But first, why we read the JPS version of Psalm 25: In English, the phrase ‘be put to shame’ is, in Biblical Hebrew, called a ‘shame root,’ which is a grammatical thing that you can build other words from. It occurs three times in this psalm; we didn’t read far enough to get to the third one. The problem is, the meaning of the root depends on the context in which it is used, and on the synonyms and antonyms for the root in that context. In verse two, these would be ‘to be empty’ and ‘to hope,’ respectively. The bottom line here is, the JPS version translates ‘shame’ as ‘disappointed’ where the pew Bible just says ‘shame’ and leaves it at that. The meaning is completely different.

Another intriguing thing about verse two is that it has three clauses, which is typical of Hebrew poetry. We can understand the middle clause in light of either the first clause or the third, reader’s choice. So, it can be read either as ‘my God, in you I trust; may I not be disappointed,’ or ‘may I not be disappointed, may my enemies not exult over me.’ Stuff like this makes reading the Bible fun.

Now, when the lectionary drops us into the middle of a story, as it does today in the Genesis reading, we have to take a look at what came before. What is it about this covenant? Why did we need it? What happened in chapters six, seven, and eight?

Bad things happened, as you might guess, beginning when ‘the sons of God’ took human wives for themselves (6:2). Their children were called the Nephilim, a race of giants, legendary ‘warriors of renown.’ But more than that, there was a great wickedness in humanity, and ‘every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually’ (6:5). The *earth* was corrupt in God’s sight, and the *earth* was filled with violence (6:11). The Lord was sorry for ever making people, and it grieved the Lord (6:6). Because people couldn’t find a way to stop the downward spiral of violence, God

intervened, forcefully. But somehow Noah had found favor in the Lord's sight. In Noah, God found at least a little bit of good, and so gave him and his family a shot at new life.

Today's reading shows us that Creation, including humanity, is one. God wants a harmonious balance in the cosmos, and humans continue to disrupt it. But Lent gives us a means and a time to restore the balance, to reflect on and repent of our sins.

Psalm 25, on the other hand, is one individual's prayer for help in a situation of unspecified trouble. His enemies are his own – he's not worried about an invading army; he's more worried about the bully next door. He's got a problem and he's looking for help, direction, and forgiveness even as he affirms God as the one entity he can trust, the only one who can help him.

The psalmist asks God to look past his shady background. He admits he needs God to teach him the right paths and to lead him in God's truth. Only God can save him. The psalmist, without saying so, has established a personal covenant with God, who never says a word.

In the Genesis reading, God said to Noah and his sons, '*As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you.*' This is a covenant not just with Noah and his sons, but with 'every living creature of all flesh.' And, again, Noah never says a word.

And the deal is that 'never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' There will still be, from time to time, floods and hurricanes and nor'easters and earthquakes and volcanoes and forest fires but they will all be just localized weather or natural disasters. Stuff happens. But, God said, 'the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy *all flesh.*' To seal the deal, and to serve as a reminder, God will set the bow in the clouds as a sign of this *everlasting* covenant. And it will be pretty.

As in Psalm 25, this is a one-way, no obligation-to-you covenant. God is now bound to humanity and the world in a new way, just as the psalmist is bound to God, voluntarily. God will make other covenants in the Bible, but this is the first one.

Now, someone correct me if I'm wrong, but I think it was Groucho Marx, or Chico dressed as Groucho, who once said, 'Who are you going to believe? Me, or your own lying eyes?'

It doesn't take much to see the problems of the world: Chaos; war; allegations of corruption in the halls of power; an apparently dysfunctional national government; and

another tragic, preventable, school shooting. There's bad news everywhere and it seems as if nobody wants to do anything about it. It's maddening and frustrating at the same time. We see it, but we can't quite believe it.

God's steadfast love is unending. God compels us to be ever-mindful of our sins and transgressions and to seek out redemption through God's love. Every week we preach something about some aspect of love for neighbor; it doesn't seem to a widely-accepted practice. We are once again left to wonder what is wrong with us as a society.

My worry is that one of these days, God just might decide it's time to take the bow out of the sky and let it rain.

The readings are connected by the unilateral covenants established by God and by the psalmist. They are both acts of self-giving in the same way a parent is bound to their children, or one friend to another.

Lent asks us, and enables us, to choose our path, or to get back on it if we've taken a side trip into the wilderness. We trust God to teach us God's ways, but God has to be hoping that *we want to learn* those ways. We have to want to know God's truth. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions, Lord, but remember *me* in your steadfast love.

The psalmist knows that only God can offer true salvation. God knows that there is always at least a little good in humanity to outweigh the evil that we do. God has made a big bet on us and it's time we held ourselves accountable, and may we be humble enough to know who to trust along the way.

Amen.