

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – February 18, 2018

[Genesis 9:8-17](#) & [Mark 1:9-15](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on Genesis 9:8-17:

1. What does this rainbow covenant indicate about the character of God? How does God’s character revealed in this part of the story compare to the character of God revealed elsewhere in the Noah story? Or in other parts of Genesis?
2. Did you notice that God’s covenant is not just with humanity, but “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” (v. 10)? What does this really mean? Were the animals and birds complicit in the evil that led to God’s judgement in the first place?
3. The rainbow has, in recent years, become the widely recognized symbol of the gay-rights movement. Do you think this is an appropriate symbolic usage of the rainbow? Or do you think the wider meaning of the symbol has been lost by its identification with the LGBTQ community?

Reflection Questions on Mark 1:9-15:

1. Compare this version of the story of Jesus’s baptism with those in Matthew and Luke. How does Mark tell the story differently?
2. Notice that it is the Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness (v. 12). What is the relationship between temptation and the spiritual life? Is there a sense in which temptation and wilderness journey is a prerequisite for spiritual authority and/or growth? What do we make of the prayer that Jesus later teaches his disciples that asks God to lead us NOT into temptation?
3. Here near the beginning of our journey through the season of Lent, what might this story have to teach us about the good news that Jesus proclaimed?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on Genesis 9:8-17 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "The Performance Art of God" – 3/1/2009)

Our passage is the conclusion of the intertwined flood narratives found in Genesis 6-9. As with much of Scripture, this material can be read on several levels. Our passage can be seen partly as an etiological story to explain the existence of rainbows; but it is profoundly more than that. Likewise, whatever you think of the "literality" of the intertwined flood narratives, don't miss the more significant messages concerning the relationship between God and human beings and all creation.

Often overlooked in reading Genesis 6-9 is that God is in a punishing-then-promising relationship with *all* of creation, not just sinful/rescued humanity. "In the beginning ... God created the heavens and the earth ..." (Genesis 1:1). But God's creation, including especially human beings, ceased being content to honor the Creator; so, God is grieved and sorry to have made humanity and other living beings (6:6-7), and God punished the creation by means of flood.

Notice the abundant use of the expressions "all flesh," "every living creature" and "earth" in Genesis 6-9. "All flesh" appears in Genesis 9:11, 15 (two times), 16, 17; also in 6:12, 13, 17, 19; 7:15, 16, 21; 8:17. God brought the flood due to the corruption and violence of "all flesh" (apparently including that of animals) — see 6:11-13; another strand of narrative (see Genesis 6:5) attributes the destruction especially to the "wickedness of humankind" — "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5; also 8:21). "Every living creature/being/thing" is a synonym for "all flesh." Similarly the "earth" is at fault before God, so God will destroy the earth (6:11-13, 17).

Likewise, God's after-the-flood promises are for "all flesh," "every living creature" and all the "earth," not just for humanity. Carefully look at Genesis 9:10-17 (*every* verse uses one or more of these expressions). In Romans 8, the apostle Paul grandly asserts that the deliverance of all creation is associated with God's anticipated final redemption of the children of God in Jesus Christ. All of God's creation is closely linked, and all together can and will praise God. In the light of Revelation 4:11, see Revelation 5:13: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne [God] and to the Lamb [the slain and risen Jesus Christ] be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'" That gives a reverse meaning to the service of "the blessing of the animals." Reginald Heber's hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy," puts it this way: "All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth, and sky and sea."

Our Genesis 9 passage is about the Creator's making/renewing a covenant with the creation. A "covenant" (*berit* in Hebrew) is essentially a formalized relationship/agreement between two parties. Some covenants are conditional: God graciously offers to do such and such, upon the condition of God's leader or people acting in a certain way (keeping the stipulations of the covenant). Other covenants are unconditional: God promises to do such and such, without any stipulations having to be met. The covenant of Genesis 9 is unconditional: The Creator makes a promise to the creation. Note the antecedent correlative covenantal promise of God in Genesis 6:17-19.

In Genesis 9, the word "covenant" appears in verses 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16 ("everlasting" covenant — it is for "future generations" of all living creatures also — see v. 12), and verse 17. God promises to establish a covenant with Noah and his family and their descendants, along with every living creature. God has judged the earth, but now promises never again to destroy the earth by means of a flood. See Genesis 8:21-22. Hosea 11:8-9 has a passage similar in tone, but one in which God addresses more particular recipients; the same Hebrew verb for destroy is used in Hosea 11:9 and Genesis 9:11, 15; Admah and Zeboiim are cities of the plain destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah (see Deuteronomy 29:23).

The rainbow imagery is likely the most memorable part of our passage in the minds and hearts of most readers/listeners. It affects us both in our physical senses and in our emotional/spiritual makeup. God gave the (rain)bow as a *sign* (9:12-13) of the covenant, a sign which will cause human and other earthly observers *and God* (see v. 16) to remember the everlasting covenant. The Hebrew noun *qéshet* is used both for the warrior's bow and for the rainbow. Elsewhere in Scripture God fires punishingly devastating arrows (in the form of thunderbolts) against God's enemies (see such passages as Lamentations 2:4;

3:12-13; Habakkuk 3:9-11; and the apocryphal/Deuterocanonical book of the Wisdom of Solomon 5:17-23). The rainbow image in Genesis 9 is thus much stronger than simply that of a pretty heavenly phenomenon. God is putting up for good the divine war-bow which God had used in the stormy period of the punishing deluge. God's bow now stays resting in the clouds. The resting bow means that ultimately God is not against us, in spite of sin and judgment (as some have worded it, "God isn't mad at you any more"); the correlative is that God is for us, in promise and hope — we now have a renewed relationship with God. The rainbow is used in Ezekiel 1:28 as part of a theophany of the glory/presence of God. See also Revelation 4:2-3; 10:1.

It is fascinating how so many religious and other groups across the spectrum(!) use the rainbow as part of their name or as a symbol of the hope which they wish to impart. And notice popular songs (such as "[Somewhere] Over the Rainbow" — lyrics by Yip Harburg) and hymns such as George Matheson's 1882 "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go": "O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain, And feel the promise is not vain, That morn shall tearless be." According to cyberhymnal.org, this was the favorite hymn of President Calvin Coolidge and was sung at his funeral. And see some resonances of meaning (without the rainbow imagery) in Natalie Sleeth's "Hymn of Promise."

There are unresolved theological questions which remain, especially in connection with the long biblical litany of post-flood disobedience and rebellion by the creation against the Creator, resulting in further punishing actions by God, followed by renewed deliverance and promise. (Walter Brueggemann, pp. 73-88 in his *Interpretation*-series commentary on Genesis, endeavors to deal with such issues.) Indeed, there has been no more global flooding; yet by some understandings the earth will one day be destroyed by fire (see 2 Peter 3:6-7). In spite of all of that, the biblical promise is that *ultimately* God will deliver God's creation (see Romans 8 again). There will be new heavens and a new earth (see Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). Even within and beyond judgment, God promises to be with us.

Commentary on Mark 1:9-15 (From *Homiletics*; "PGI Time" – February 18, 2018)

One of the first rules for interpreting the gospels that seminarians learn is to be sure they are interpreting the text that is actually before them rather than some hybrid version combining elements of all the canonical accounts. That same rule is also one of the hardest for preachers to follow. Not all the blame resides with preachers, however; congregants can be quick to respond after the sermon (or, worse, subconsciously during the sermon) that the story simply goes differently because "the story" for them is the "hybrid story." But precisely because sometimes a particular gospel's text can go against the grain of expectation, it can open new insights for those who attentively read (in the case of preachers) and listen to (for congregants) its very particularity. Such is certainly the case with Mark 1:9-15.

Following the description of John's ministry of baptism -- a baptism which would prepare people for the Lord's coming through repentance -- this lectionary passage opens with the simple and straightforward statement that Jesus came to be baptized by John (v. 9). This is the same Jesus who would baptize with a holy spirit (the Greek lacks a definite article) rather than water (vv. 2-8). Completely lacking from Mark is any hint that there might be anything problematic about Jesus' seeking baptism for the purpose of repentance (contrast especially Matthew 3:14-15). This evangelist's only concern in the relationship between Jesus and John seems to be that Jesus arrived before the Baptizer was arrested (see v. 14a). The question of whether Jesus himself needs to repent is passed over in the story.

Instead, what is made explicit is that following this baptism with water, Jesus himself was baptized with / received the Holy Spirit (and here in v. 10 the definite article is present). But like so much else in Mark's gospel that marks Jesus as the Christ, this experience is veiled in secrecy. Whereas the readers are allowed to share in the experience of the heavens being cleaved open, the narrator explicitly restricts the awareness to Jesus himself at the time of the Spirit's descent. Only "*he* saw the heavens opened," and the voice of God is directed only to him: "*You* are my Son, the Beloved; with *you* I am well pleased." Contrast this with Luke's ambiguity regarding who is aware of what is going on (while the statement is directed to Jesus, who sees and hears, what transpires is obscured by the passive construction, "the heaven was

opened"; Luke 3:21-22) and Matthew's explicit statement that all this is for the benefit of others (no explicit subject is given for which "he" it was who saw the dove-like Spirit, but the statement by the divine voice is clearly directed to those gathered: "*This* is my Son ..."; Matthew 3:16-17). Jesus is the one who in the face of what is about to happen must know of God's spiritual presence with and affirmation of him.

One can only be left to wonder, however, how eager others will be to share this baptism with the Spirit, given its consequences for Jesus. Using a word (εκβαλλω) most often associated with exorcism in Mark's gospel, Jesus is "cast out" into the wilderness by the Spirit that has descended upon him, where for the next 40 days he is tested by Satan. The spiritual world is very real for this evangelist, and it is not always immediately apparent to those who engage it whether it will be for good or for evil (cf. 3:21-27).

It is at this point that knowledge of the other synoptic gospels most impinges upon the understanding of Mark. Yet despite its sparseness of language, it is this gospel that more than the others intensifies the testing that Jesus endures. Precisely because this testing isn't reduced to three specific temptations, it is clear that this is a full 40 days of trial and not just an afternoon at the end of more than a month of fasting. Indeed, Mark never mentions that Jesus fasted during this period. Are we to infer that God provided for him in these 40 days as God provided for Israel during its 40 years in the wilderness? Precisely because there is no mention of resisting each of Satan's temptations with a quote from Scripture, there can be no reducing this trial to a verbal sparring match.

Certainly the most enigmatic aspect of Mark's account is the reference to the "wild beasts" (v. 13b). The modern tendency is to hear in this reference an intensification of threat and danger in the wilderness. Yet patristic era commentators took an entirely different approach. For them, the presence of the "wild beasts" drew a parallel with Adam while in the garden of Eden. Once more, Satan is tempting the "human one" (to anticipate Jesus' self-designation as υιος του ανθρωπου beginning at 2:10 and throughout this gospel) amid the beasts, but this time the "human one" prevails and is ministered to by the angels rather than driven out by them (cf. Genesis 3:22-24). On this reading of the "wild beasts," the "wilderness" is not a satanic and Godforsaken place. Rather, God is present with Jesus throughout this trial in the same way God was present with Adam in Eden and Israel in Sinai. Yet whereas both humanity generally (Adam) and God's chosen people (Israel) have failed such temptations in the past, this time the "human one" succeeds in plundering Satan's house (cf. again Mark 3:27).

With this period of testing ended, the time of preparing God's way in the wilderness (cf. v. 3) has itself been completed. John's voice that had cried out in the wilderness is silenced by his arrest (v. 14a). Jesus is no longer impelled by the Holy Spirit to remain in the wilderness, and has returned to Galilee. There he begins preaching not preparation but the announcement that now "the time is fulfilled" (v. 15a). The "beginning of the good news" (v. 1) has been realized, for now the "reign of God is at hand" for those who "believe the gospel," the message of God's good news for humanity (v. 15b). But God's imminent arrival does not mean that the time for repentance has passed. Jesus continues to call people to repent. Repentance is not motivated, then, by fear of God's approach; rather it is grounded in the good news of God's grace and forgiveness. The time of testing is not over, but the good news is that the Holy Spirit is available to all engaged in the spiritual struggle against evil.

Additional Resources

- ["The Text this Week"](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).