

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week I spent four days in Wernersville, PA, on a private retreat. The place where I stayed had once been a Catholic school with room for up to 500 pupils, but now it was home to eight Jesuit monks. Walking through its long corridors was like being in a museum after closing time. It was a perfect place for a quiet retreat involving reflection and prayer.

In my room, above the desk, was a children's picture of Noah's ark, with elephants, lions, giraffes, and cows. There was a dove with a branch in its beak. There was also a rainbow in the corner of the painting. As a picture, it seemed out of place in the adult surroundings of the retreat center, and I thought it an odd choice for the room, given the number of more grown-up devotional pictures on the walls throughout the center. However, once I had let go of my inner art critic, I enjoyed the picture. It had a title, as well, written in large letters below the picture: "God Keeps His Promises."

I could imagine sitting down with a group of youngsters, and letting them study the picture, and I would talk about how God loves his creation and how the animals were led onto the ark two by two, so that they would be saved from the flood. I would have talked about the dove being released into the air and then, on the second time, bringing back evidence that there was dry land somewhere. And there was the rainbow, with its many colors, a symbol of God's faithfulness, to let us know that he would always be there for us, whatever happens. I would explain how the story is about a God who keeps his promises.

What would have been harder to talk about is why God flooded the world in the first place. Why did most of humanity - and the animal kingdom, for that matter - have to die? From God's point of view, it was the irredeemable sinfulness of humanity which brought about their destruction. It seems like a sad ending for a project which at first seemed so promising. You know, when God first made the earth and populated it with creatures and vegetation, he was very pleased at what he had done. Then, one fifth of the way through the first book of the Bible, we read that God wiped out all the creatures, save for the lucky few able to board the ark.

The flood divides world history into two periods: before and after the flood. The flood is the act of de-creation. It's the moment when God the Creator takes the piece of paper he has been writing on and screws it up into a ball. The first draft of history wasn't going according to plan, and so God abandons it. When God begins anew, he makes one important change: he makes a covenant, or promise, with the survivors. God says, "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." In this second draft of history, Noah is the second Adam, the father of the new human race. God's anger has turned into forgiveness.

Since then, the human race has flourished, although it has come close to wiping itself out on one or two occasions, without needing God's help. However, the covenant between God and humanity has endured. The word "covenant" has a legal connotation for us, and in some ways it is helpful to think of it as a contract between God and the human race. You know the kind of

thing: you keep your end of the bargain and I'll keep mind. But that isn't all that God had in mind, which is why the covenant between God and humanity is not signed in ink but seen in a "bow in the clouds." That rainbow expresses the covenant better than any legal document. It spans heaven and touches the earth - it contains every color and, poetically speaking, it refracts the light of God's love.

The Bible is a record of the history of the covenant between God and humanity. It records the highs and lows of this relationship. We find the lows in the histories, which include graphic descriptions of the sack of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. The lament of the exiles is expressed in some of the psalms, most bitterly in Psalm 137. In the Bible we find the warnings given by God's prophets, by Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea and others, telling people to abandon their false gods and return to the one true God. Throughout the travails of the Israelites, God never abandons the people to their wickedness. In the covenant with God, it is we who are the unfaithful ones: we are the ones who turn away from God and embrace the latest fad or fashion, who think with our eyes and appetites instead of with our brains.

The Bible also records the highs: God leading the Israelites to the promised land. The example of its leaders, such as Moses, Abraham, Jacob, and especially King David, under whose leadership Israel flourished. In the psalms, some of which were written by David, we see expressed the personal relationship with God which lies at the heart of the covenant. The Bible also looks forward to the day when God will send a Messiah - a successor to King David - who will lead the people to freedom.

That day of freedom arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus tells the people, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." God keeps his promises, and Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise. In Jesus, the relationship between God and humanity moves to another level. Jesus is the Messiah-King and chosen servant, who invites us to enter the kingdom of heaven and accept the salvation that comes from God.

To understand how the people saw all of this at the time, we need to turn to the first letter of Peter, which describes a Messiah who chose the path of suffering and death as the way to achieve our salvation. Now, this is not an easy thing to teach. Listen again to what Peter says: "Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." Jesus, the righteous, suffered for those who were unrighteous. Here we see how God's covenant finds its new expression, in generous and sacrificial love. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

All of this began as a story of the people of Israel, but when Jesus came this story included not only the Jews but Gentiles. Jesus is like a fisherman who casts his net wide and brings in fish of every kind. He brings us salvation, and his motivation is purely that of love.

How should we respond? They say that love, to have any meaning, must be returned. Love which is given but not returned is like water falling into a desert. Nothing will grow there. But love which falls into rich soil will aid growth - the plants that spring forth will stretch towards the light of the Sun. That rich soil is our own hearts, and the love which God gives us is the love of Jesus Christ for the unrighteous. His love is life giving, and seeks a love in return. The

question for you this Lent will be this: how can I, unrighteous as I am, return the love given me by the one who is righteous?

God keeps his promises. In Jesus Christ, God promises us a faithful companion throughout our lives. Hear again these words from psalm 25, "Gracious and upright is the Lord; therefore he teaches sinners in the way. He guides the humble in doing right and teaches his way to the lowly. All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." Our coming here this morning is a wonderful opportunity for us to renew that covenant in our own lives. After being away for so long, it is good to come back, and hear the words of Scripture, and let them sink into our souls as a healing balm.

They remind us of what God has done for us, how he provides for us, forgives us and saves us. We are receivers of the greatest gift on earth, which is God's love.

May your Lent be fruitful and blessed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Father David Beresford