

February 18, 2018

First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; Mark 1:9-25

“Bouvet and the Rainbow”

In the name of God who creates life,

In the name of the Savior who loves life,

In the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.

Amen

The story of Noah we heard today got me to thinking about an adventure that is in progress, it is still being written. About a month ago twenty hearty souls, a couple of whom are friends of mine, set out on the trip of a life time. The group converged upon Punta Arenas in southern Chile for an expedition to the remote Norwegian island of Bouvet.

Bouvet is about as far from any form of civilization as you can get. It is a speck of land, mostly ice, a little rock and a lot of birds, about 1600 miles south south-west of the Republic of South Africa. In an average year this remote island will only see about five days of sunshine, and temperatures rarely climb above freezing. Despite its remoteness and harsh environment it occasionally draws explorers and scientists willing to take the risk and make the trip.

The trip must be done by boat initially, and then helicopter, as there are no harbors or even a shoreline to make a landing on. These twenty souls embarked on this journey, a journey made at great personal cost and potentially great risk.

The crossing to the island took twelve days. Initially the weather was good, or as good as could be expected in the area of the roaring forties and furious fifties. However, a few days into the voyage several low pressure systems caught up with their boat the *Betanzos* battering them with winds as high as 45 knots and swells of 20 feet or more. One day the description of the weather was “mixed up and angry seas” the next it read “confused seas”. The crew was faced with sea sickness and, as one described it, “shifting migration patterns of gear and furniture”.

On January 31 they arrived off the coast of Bouvet and made anchor. The winds continued at 35 knots and the temperature hovered around the freezing mark. There was no way they could launch the helicopters to the island, all they could do was wait out the weather with their goal in sight.

After four days the weather showed no signs of letting up, and to add to their situation one of the engines on the *Betanzos* developed problems. The team, who had come from eight countries, and had been planning this expedition for 10 years, and had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the effort, now faced a decision that was heartbreaking. They had to make the call to abort the effort and make their way back to Punta Arenas. Unfortunately the problem with the engine was more critical than expected, and

they had to make for the nearest safe port, Cape Town. On February 5th they were underway, at an average speed of 6 knots. Just yesterday morning word arrived they made port in Cape Town setting foot on dry land after a total of 31 days at sea.

It isn't the amount of time they spent at sea that drew my mind to Noah, but two things; first the sense of purpose of the journey and second the conditions experienced along the way.

The Bouvet expedition clearly had a goal in mind for their journey, but we don't really think about what Noah must have thought about the deluge he faced, one with the intent to destroy humankind. God had found Noah and his family to be the last righteous ones on earth and had sent the rain to wipe out the evil that had overtaken the world. And not just any rain! In Rabbinic wisdom, or Haggadah, God had sent the rain first through the hell of Gehenna before it fell to earth, burning the skin of those it fell on. Adrift in this hellish flood Noah must have thought "What next, where does it go from here?"

The human mind is an amazing thing! Noah spent a lot of time on the ark and eventually he must have come up with the vision of how this all would end; and as the goal became as clear as the goal for those on the *Betanzos*, he worked towards it. What it was we do not know, but he must have had an end in mind.

We too are a lot like the crew on their way to Bouvet and Noah. A few days ago we were at our Punta Arenas, we were with Noah building the Ark – we were at our port of departure for Lent – Ash Wednesday. As we begin our journey through Lent towards our

goal, Easter, we find ourselves taking on spiritual practices. Perhaps we pray more, or abstain from meat on Fridays. Maybe we take part in a structured Lenten study. Then we start digging deeper realizing that we need to make room inside for God if we're going to do this right. We start looking at the things we need to shed, our wrongdoings, our sin. We see the need for repentance and forgiveness as our sins emerge like the swells of the sea chasing after the boat...our soul. What started as a smooth journey towards Easter is getting rougher; we become aware of how serious this storm is that keeps us from God.

And then there is that migratory gear and furniture that isn't tied down! The hellish rain that stings and burns as it hits us; the sin around us, the evil in the world.

In the last few days we were once again hit with news of another school shooting. As we, along with folks all around the country, and in Parkland try to come to grips with an evil that is beyond imagination, we find ourselves relating more to the world Noah found himself in; a world overtaken by evil and death. The image of a parent consoling another, tears streaming down, the ashen cross on her forehead brought home to many of us the power of evil in the world. The evil that stands between us and God seems a fierce tempest.

The storm does not let up as we approach our goal, or what we think is our goal. Amid the fear, uncertainty and doubt found in the storm we realize there is a better goal, God's goal. We find strength to proclaim "We will not be abandoned on this island" –

“We will not die on this ark” – “We will not let the love of God and God’s goodness be overtaken by evil”. But how? How do we make such claims in the midst of the storm?

We have reached the point of our journey where it isn’t a thin place between us and God, but an encounter with God. We have reached the point where the water that surrounds us, crashes over us in swells, and nearly wipes us off the face of the earth...has become Holy. It has become promise. The water has become Covenant.

It is hard to hear God amid the clamor of the storm, but there it is for us to see, the sign that God gave Noah, this sign found in the rainbow; droplets of water, once part of the storm, signifying a promise of love, peace, friendship and joy. And for us, this Holy Covenant, our relationship with God through Christ lives out in our Baptism. It is through the water of Baptism that we are forgiven and strengthened to make it out of the storm and to the resurrection. In Baptism we make statements of belief, but don’t forget we also make statements of doing, building up God’s Kingdom by persevering against evil, proclaiming the good news, seeking Christ in others, and striving for justice and peace. We can make the claim because we are doers for God. We are participants in the heavenly kingdom. We are heirs of Christ strengthened by the Holy Spirit; all through the hope of resurrection. We still did not make it to the island, all that we know may still be lost, the lives taken from us will not be given back, but take heart, God’s promise is with us before and during the tempest and we are called to emerge from the storm Holy and blessed.

And take heed to not get lost in your own storm. You will encounter others caught up in midst of the gale, others trying to make it to the island. You will meet those who have lost everything. You will meet those who mourn the death of innocent lives.

God's covenant with you, that rainbow, is found in your heart to welcome the weary back to dry land, to bring a new beginning after the devastation, and to bring peace to those who mourn.