

Lord, make these words to be your Word, that our hearts might become your Heart.

“I’ve got some good news and some bad news...”

How many jokes and stories have you heard begin that way?

It makes us laugh, and it can also make us anxious.

Can’t we just have some good news without any bad news? Please?

In today’s Gospel, we see Jesus beginning his public ministry in a marvelous way – baptized in the Jordan, breaking through to the surface and the Spirit coming like a dove, empowering Him for ministry; the voice of the Father with words of sweet affirmation, “*This is my Son whom I love, with Whom I am well pleased.*” Then, Mark tells us, immediately that same, sweet Spirit drove Him into the wilderness, where he endured forty days of hunger, and the deep temptation to subvert his whole mission before he even really began it.

Those days also prepared him for the life of hunger, fatigue and constant harassment that awaited him as He set out to preach and demonstrate the Good News of God’s Kingdom.

And they began his preparation for the Cross,

where all the bad news in the world was waiting to attach itself to him.

It’s not good news or bad, either/or – it’s both/and.

And our first reading, that wonderful rainbow and all the talk of God’s promise, and the covenant that he makes with “all living things” – what a nice story.

Except we skipped a few parts. Those of us who remember the whole story of Noah and the ark, will remember the little detail about the flood.

One of the most troublesome passages in the Bible:

the story of all living life being wiped out, seemingly at God’s hand.

Who is this God who sent the rains and the flood, who preserved a reproducible remnant of his glorious creation, and destroyed the rest?

Not, surely, the same Father who loves the life He has made?

Is this how we see God? As a genocidal monster, one who could wipe out all life, like a potter whose pot has gone haywire, mashing it back into wet clay again.

Do we like to think of ourselves as a species so fallen, so depraved, it required virtual annihilation?

The Flood is one of those stories many Christians prefer to step around, to avoid. When we teach it to our children we emphasize the ark and the cute animals, two by two, “elephants and kangaroozies, roozies, children of the world.” But I don’t think we can just skip over it and jump to the doves and rainbows. It’s not good news or bad, either/or – it’s both/and.

In life, we never do well avoiding things that are painful and scary; but rather, benefit when we go straight into them and come out the other side. It’s the same with the parts of scripture that trouble us. The story is there, and the story was foundational for the people of Israel. It was buried deep in their deep memory, and it accounted for things. Maybe it was meant to be a cautionary tale, a morality tale. As that, it still has power for us – the notion of plants and birds and animals being wiped out because of the human willfulness is a present reality...

Or is the story speaking of humanity’s relationship with God? God is the maker of life, the maker of us, God’s beloved, made in God’s image! God loves life, and our life, so much he made sure we’d have an eternity of it. So how could God send a flood?

What kind of God allows these things to happen, we ask, let alone visits such a thing on the earth – especially after this promise recorded for all time:

“Never again will I send a flood to destroy the whole earth.”

Closer to home, what kind of God allows any bad things to happen?

Another strategy is to explain this as a folk tale told by an ancient community trying to give meaning to a natural, catastrophic event – perhaps floods brought on by the melting of the ice caps after the ice age. Many Ancient Near Eastern cultures had flood stories in their mythologies. Our spiritual ancestors just told the story in such a way that emphasized God’s power rather than God’s love.

They weren’t so worried about God looking good or kind or loving. They were concerned with showing that God is powerful and in charge.

Are these our choices? To reject this story as distasteful, or dismiss it as a folktale told by ancient peoples trying to make sense of a cataclysm, or just buy it.

That’s either/or thinking. Both/and thinking invites us to say:

What meaning did those peoples gave to this event?

They saw in the flood and its aftermath was an occasion for God to make a huge promise, a covenant with all living things, for life.

The story shows us God bringing new creation after the trauma,
new possibilities, new relationships, new promises. New life.
It's not good news or bad, either/or – it's both/and.

Jesus didn't try to evade the desert, or Satan's predations.
He turned and headed straight into them.
And God did not leave him alone; angels attended him, and wild animals.
It's not either/or – it's both/and.

We have just begun the season of Lent, and this year we have a focus on
"becoming peacemakers."
We can't be peacemakers without embracing both/and thinking.
Either/or thinking is = killing our nation, dividing our families.
The idea that some people are good and some bad is a great lie -
most people who do monstrous things endured great trauma as children.
The most saintly people are capable of hurting and harm.
We can be a great nation AND have legacies of evil which we have to heal.

There is a simple way to begin to cultivate either/or thinking:
banish the word "but" from your vocabulary. "But" is a negating word.
Replace it with "And." "It is a beautiful day but really cold." You've negated it.
"It's a beautiful AND really cold." Still two true statements, but there's room.
"I love you, but you make me so mad when you..." Do you feel loved?
"I love you, AND I get so angry when you..." - Two true statements, held together.
"God gave us this earth, but climate change is making it uninhabitable."
A dead end. Bad news.
"God gave us this earth, and climate change is making it uninhabitable."
The "and" leaves us room for hope, where the "but" cancels it out.
I challenge you to try to hear your "buts" and replace them with "ands."

We are people of contradiction.
we are simultaneously sinners because we seek our own way, and saints,
because the Father said so and Jesus made it so and the Spirit keeps it so.
We are children of the Good News, children of God's promise
AND we live amid the bad news, the ongoing pain of this world.
That pain sometimes touches our own lives; certainly it touches life all around us.

And we are called into a funny relationship with that bad news.
Being saved in Christ's sacrifice, we are now, like him, broken open for the world.
That's how the church is like an ark now: run aground on a rock, the cornerstone,
Christ himself; broken open for the world, a source of life and hope,
People of "and" in a world of "But."

I don't know if we could live this way only on the strength of the rainbow and that
covenant made with Noah; we've seen too much life destroyed since then.
I don't think if we could live this way if our story ended on Good Friday.
What makes us different is that we can see through Good Friday
to what waits beyond it.
We can't go around it – we must go through it, but we go anticipating that
glorious Easter morning, when all the "no's" became "yes,"
all the bad news was transcended by the Good News that Jesus' followers
have been unable to keep from proclaiming for over 2000 years since.

There was no rainbow that morning – but oh, what a sunrise!

Amen.

Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and 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. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."