

## On Hope

Since the beginning of 2021, the ideas of inoculation and vaccination have been very much in the news and I think that with today's readings for the First Sunday of Lent, the Church is giving us all an inoculation of Hope as we anticipate the commemoration of the grim events of Jesus' crucifixion and death at the end of Lent.

Lent can seem like a grim time. We begin it on Ash Wednesdays by having ashes rubbed into our foreheads and being reminded, "Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return." We put away the green vestments of ordinary time replace them with purple. We say good bye to something we enjoy for forty days and when I was a kid, we said Hello to fish sticks—which I certainly didn't enjoy-every Friday. And of course we eventually come to Ash Wednesday when the altar is stripped and the Blessed Sacrament is removed from the Tabernacle as we recall Jesus' death.

Today's first reading certainly helps to inoculate against a potentially grim experience of Lent by presenting us with one of the most vivid stories and symbols of hope from the Hebrew Scriptures: Noah's vision of the rainbow and the promise God makes in it at the end of the story of the Flood from the Book of Genesis.

Noah and his family have just endured an especially harrowing experience of "sheltering in Place." Described in Scripture. They have spent 40 days and nights tossing on the waves of a global flood, locked into the Ark, not only with each other, but with every animal Noah was able to collect before the Flood began, including, I suppose two "seasick crocodiles" --which according to memorable song in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" are the only things less pleasant to spend time with than the Grinch. But once the terrible experience of the Flood is over, God gives Noah and his family hope by promising them that no one will ever have to endure anything like it again. God tells Noah and his family: I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

<sup>12</sup> And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: <sup>13</sup> I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. <sup>16</sup> Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

The Hebrews were not the only ancient people who created a myth about one family surviving a global flood sent by the gods. The Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh contains the story of Atrahasis who survived a terrifying flood along with his wife and all their cattle by riding it out in a boat built of reeds and pitch, and the ancient Greeks told the story of Deucalion and his wife, Pyrrha who took refuge in a large chest to ride out a flood sent by Zeus to punish humanity for offering him human sacrifices. But none of the other ancient Flood myths conclude with the kind of Hope that closes Noah’s story. After Mr. and Mrs. Atrahasis make it to dry land, the goddess Ishtar appears, makes them both immortal and teleports them off to some faraway land that has not been ravaged by the Flood. In the Greek myth, Deucalion and his wife wonder how the two of them are supposed to repopulate the entire world, so they ask Themis, the goddess of Justice for advice. Themis tells them to walk away while throwing the bones of their mother over their shoulders. The Deucalion’s think that this plan sounds a little creepy and inefficient, even for a Greek myth, but they conclude that the “Mother Themis is referring to must be the Earth and that her “bones” must be the rocks, so they walk away throwing stones behind them. Those thrown by Deucalion become little boys, while the ones thrown by Pyrrha become little girls. Those children then grow up to become men and women who inherit the task of repopulating the world the old-fashioned way. Each of the pagan Flood myths has a happy ending, but neither contains anything like the hope that blazes out in the Hebrew God’s promise of the rainbow that nothing so terrible will ever happen again. And this theme of the hope which God’s grace and love offer us runs through all of today’s readings. In today’s Gospel from Mark, we heard that after suffering deprivation and satanic harassment for forty days in the desert when, like Noah, he was surrounded by wild beasts, Jesus was served by angels. And in

the second reading from the First Letter of Peter, the hope we are offered reaches a cosmic, supernatural plane. Now that we have changed from praying the Nicene Creed at mass to the Apostles' Creed, some people may have been confused by its statement that Jesus "descended into hell" after his death. This statement is based on something we just heard from Peter's Letter. Peter writes that after Christ was put to death in the flesh, he went to preach to the "spirits in prison."

In the middle Ages, Catholics believed that anyone who hadn't been baptized or had not worshipped Jesus could not possibly be saved. The great medieval Catholic poet Dante accepted this idea and repeats it several times in the *Divine Comedy*. The problem with this idea was that it left Catholics having to believe that every person who lived before Jesus, from virtuous pagans like the Wise Men and Socrates to Moses and Noah and all the great heroes and heroines of the Old Testament was in hell, or best, in Limbo. Overtime this didn't sit well with people, and so belief in an idea called "The Harrowing of Hell" developed. According to this belief, after his physical death on the Cross, Jesus descended spiritually into hell where he preached the Gospel to the souls "imprisoned" there and delivered the souls of the deserving into Paradise. In other words, not even the walls of Hell itself were strong enough to shut out the love of God. There was even one early Christian theologian who argued that just as the relentless action of the tide could eventually wash away solid rock, so the infinite love of God would someday wear down the proud, but finite rejection of that love by even Satan himself. This idea was called "*apokatastasis*," but the Church declared it a heresy, so let's just leave it at that for now.

The important message to take from these readings is the importance of retaining our hope in the power of God's love for us. Now I know that isn't always easy and it may not always seem sensible, but I think it is what Scripture says. Of course, sometimes it's difficult to feel hopeful or to believe that God is standing with us. Certainly in times like those we are living in now, when biological, economic, political, and even meteorological threats seem to be hanging over our heads like the Sword of Damocles or Edgar Allen Poe's Pendulum, saying that we feel hopeful can seem like silly Pollyanna-ish whistling past the graveyard. Personally, I will confess that in the seven years since I suffered a stroke which has partially paralyzed my left side and completely upended my life, I have sometimes found it hard to feel hopeful. I didn't always move like Lon Chaney Jr. limping out of a pyramid or like something lurching out of a German

castle with bolts in its neck, and much as I love Boris Karloff and Lon Chaney Jr., I don't like the fact that I move that way now.

When we face the kinds of struggles that many of us do now, it may not be easy to feel hopeful, but these readings remind us, as does Easter itself, that even though the floodwaters may be deep, they are not bottomless and the rain will stop eventually. Pilate, Caiaphas, and Herod may all speak very loudly on Good Friday, but they do not get the last word on Easter Sunday.

“This is the will of the one who sent me,” says Jesus, “That I should not lose anything of what the Father gave me.” The Father gave us to the Son by giving the Son to us, and that means we can never be lost.