

## Sermon

March 1, 2009

Texts: Gen. 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15

“The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created... for I am sorry that I have made them.” Those words mark the beginning of the story of the great flood and Noah’s ark. God saw that there was great evil and wickedness everywhere, and decided to put an end to that evil and wickedness by sending a great flood, drowning everything. Yet he decided to make an exception, leaving one family, that of Noah, and saving the animals he had created as well by means of the ark.

According to our text for today, however, after God had destroyed everything by means of the flood, he vowed never to do it again. Perhaps God was sorry again—this time sorry that he had destroyed everything with a flood. Or perhaps God simply decided that, now that there was a new start, he would do things differently. He would deal with human sin and evil in a different way. For whatever reason, once God had determined never again to destroy everything with a flood, he decided to do something beautiful: create rainbows. From now on, instead of fighting evil with floods, God would fight evil by sending rainbows.

One of the things I have always noticed about living here in Mexico City is that we don’t get rainbows very often, at least as far as I can tell. When I have lived in other places, rainbows are much more common. And they are a very beautiful sight to behold. Rainbows capture our attention, and we can look at them for quite a while without getting tired or bored. Human beings have always been fascinated by them.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, a time when we stop and reflect on things we don’t usually like to think about: what is wrong in our lives and in our world; things that we need to repent of and change; the fact that we are mortal and frail and imperfect. You know, when we look inside of ourselves, we see a lot of things that are not good: resentment and anger and pain and selfish desires. Those are things we need to change for our own good.

But the problem isn’t just in each of us personally; it’s in our relationships with others, with our loved ones, with other people that we relate to on a day-to-day basis at work or school or in other contexts. It has to do with the way we all treat one another, how we do things that hurt each other and bring pain and suffering into the lives of one another, as well as how we fail to do the good things that bring wholeness and well-being and happiness into each other’s lives.

And the problem goes much further than our own personal relationships with others: it’s in our society and the world at large. We only need to look at the newspaper or turn on the TV or radio to see how sin and evil are present everywhere, constantly bringing suffering and pain and death into the lives of people. It’s just like at the beginning of the story of the flood: there is wickedness and sin and evil everywhere among human beings, including in each of us.

When we encounter sin and evil and want to overcome it, there are basically two things we can do. We can attempt to destroy it by force. We can fight against it, resist it, try to stamp it out. In other words, we can do the same thing God did when he sent the flood: simply put an end to evil by doing away with whatever is causing it. And there are times when that is necessary. There are times when the only way to stop evil is by force.

But there is another way to attempt to overcome sin and evil as well. And that’s by doing what God did after the flood: creating rainbows. Overcoming evil with goodness. Overcoming

hatred with love. Overcoming anger with forgiveness. Overcoming pain by reaching out to heal. Overcoming what is ugly with what is beautiful. You know, at various times in our lives, we are all hurt by others. We are treated unjustly. People do things that make us suffer, whether intentionally or not, including especially our loved ones. Each one of us here has been hurt by other people, sometimes hurt very deeply. We have scars, and sometimes we have wounds that are still open and have not healed.

For some reason, when that happens to us, our most natural response is to strike back. If you treat me unjustly, I'm going to treat you the same way. If you hurt me, then I'm going to hurt you worse. Of course, it's never good to respond that way, intentionally trying to hurt others. It only makes things worse, and doesn't solve anything. At times, however, it is appropriate and necessary to attempt to put an end to the evil and injustice that others are practicing against us by standing up and speaking out and resisting it.

There are times when we cannot just overlook sin and evil in others and ourselves, and pretend that there is no problem when in reality there is a problem, and we or other people are being hurt. It is not always wrong to get angry and say that something is simply not acceptable and that we will not tolerate it. That is true both in our relationships with others and in our own selves. There are things in all of us that are not good and that we must repent of and struggle against.

At times sin and evil are like a cancer that can only be treated by attempting to destroy it. And that cancer can be in each of us individually or in our relationships with others and our world at large. But there are also times when the best way to respond to sin and evil and injustice is to make rainbows. That goes against our nature. It is not easy. But when we are able to do so, it is a beautiful thing. When others hurt us and treat us unjustly, and we are able to reach out to them in effect to make a rainbow between us, it is truly wonderful. And when in our own lives we are filled with lots of negativity and pain and hurting, we need to say, "I don't want to be like this. I need to put some rainbows into my life, to fill it with good and beautiful and positive things." And to do that, we need to look to God and ask for help.

As we think about repenting and changing what is wrong in our life and our relationships and our world during this time of Lent, maybe this year we can think of repentance in terms of creating rainbows. Responding to what is wrong in us, and in our relationships with others, and in our world by seeking to overcome ugliness with beauty. To say, what I really need to change in my life is the way I react to the bad things that happen to me, and what I really need to change in my relationships is the way I treat others, even when they don't treat me as they should.

The repentance I need, the change I need to make in my life, is to make more rainbows, lots of rainbows. May this period of Lent be a time of overcoming what is ugly in us with what is beautiful. Amen.