

“Is Your Conscience Clear?”
Lent 1b Faith Promise
Mark 1:9-15

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

Some of you know that James Brooks, our youth minister, is enrolled in the master of divinity degree program at Luther Seminary. This semester he is taking Hebrew. I am his coach. Some of you have seen him in his role as coach of the 7th and 8th grade boys' basketball team and you know what a fine athlete and coach he is. So, I take pride in being coach to the coach. He burst into my study at the beginning of the semester saying, “I don't want to take Hebrew. It's hard. I can't do it.” I said, “You can do it James. It is easier than Greek. You got an A in Greek. Knowing the languages in which the Bible was written will give you insight you cannot have without it.” A few days later he burst into my study saying, “I don't want to take Hebrew. It is hard. I can't do it.” I said much the same thing I said before. A few days ago he burst into my study quoting from Psalm 23, “‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.’ Follow, the verb is *radaph*. It means pursue or chase,” he said. “‘Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me and chase me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.’ Yes,” said James, “that is so much stronger than follow. ‘Goodness and mercy will pursue me.’” And out he went, pursued by goodness and mercy, to learn some more Hebrew.

As follow is too weak a word in Psalm 23, the word sign is too weak in the first reading today. It says God set the rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant. But with a covenant more than a sign is called for. You make a covenant with the car dealer, they don't want a sign; they want some money down. Make a covenant with your spouse and you give over a ring in pledge that all that I am and all that I have is yours and vice versa. Indeed the word in Hebrew is not sign. The word is pledge.

The rainbow is God's outer garment, which God gives as a pledge that God will make good on the promise. I know some of you are thinking, “Pastor Modahl is making this up because it is pledge Sunday.” And I know preachers have been known to do some tortured plumbing work on the text to make the connections they want. When the plumbers installed the hot water heater in our basement they used any number of elbow joints and lots of piping to connect the gas supply to the heater and run cold water to and the hot water from the heater. That is not to say I won't be using some elbow joints on this sermon before I'm through, but that is not the case here.

The rainbow came to be so closely associated with God that it is described as one of God's robes. One cannot look directly upon God. Those allowed a look see an outer garment. Isaiah saw the hem of God's robe. Ezekiel says (1:28), “Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, John described what he saw when he was ushered into God's throne room, “And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.” From Jesus' time back we learn that the item most often given as a pledge for future payment on a debt was the robe that served as outer garment.

God gives his outer garment, his rainbow cloak, as a pledge. It is a pledge, a deposit, on the fulfillment of the promise never again to destroy the earth in such a way. Or put it this way. God says, "I will never leave you desolate." Or try this, "'Do not be afraid,' says the Lord your God, 'I am your strength and your shield.'" That word is repeated in scripture from beginning to end. These are good words to hear, especially in troubled economic times. On the positive side God promises an abundant creation with enough to supply the needs of all the people of the earth. That some don't have enough is not a problem with God or God's creation but with human management of the creation. Call it a stewardship problem. God promises to supply all our physical needs. God makes us stewards of the creation, managers in the use and distribution of God's good gifts. If we ever doubt there is enough God gives us his rainbow garment in pledge. We can give thanks for what we have.

As good as that is, in the first reading there is the hint of something even better. God started over on the creation because of human sin. He saved Noah and his family as seeds to repopulate the earth. Germinating within those seeds, however, was the same sin that infected the creation in the first place. Noah may have been righteous but the term righteous when applied to us is a relative term and we don't have to read much farther into Genesis before we get to even more sordid tales of our sinfulness. The God who will never leave us desolate has a better idea than destruction. God's better idea is a new creation. There is a hint of it in the first reading. God boldly makes the pledge in the Gospel.

When Jesus came up out of the water newly baptized, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." When Noah released the dove from the ark it came to rest in God's renewed creation. So at Jesus' baptism the dove came to rest on New Creation, on Jesus. We always picture the dove as a gentle bird, a bird of peace. Perhaps the Spirit assumed some other form when it then immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Mark takes only two verses to tell us what Matthew takes eleven and Luke thirteen verses to tell. Yet Mark alone includes the curious detail that Jesus was with the wild beasts. Who else was tempted by the devil, in a landscape as yet undeveloped, while surrounded by wild beasts, a snake in particular? Mark's small detail portrays Jesus as the new Adam. This one fared better when confronted with Satan's testing. Jesus died as all Adam's heirs must die. But when Jesus rose from the grave, God showed him forth as the first born of God's new creation. It is a new creation into which we are born by our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection.

Peter says the flood prefigures baptism. God used the waters of the flood to destroy sin. Noah and his family were brought to safety through the flood waters. God started over with them. The creation was renewed. Peter writes, "And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." A better translation is "a pledge to God proceeding from a clear conscience." I'm not bending the text. You can come look it up on my Greek dictionary. Let's try the verse with those words. "And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as a pledge to God proceeding from a clear conscience."

Is your conscience clear? A clear conscience is what God offers us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He took our sin and brokenness to the grave. When God raised him to life the power of sin was left behind. Sin no longer as the ability to determine how our lives turn out. We bring our sin to its watery grave daily by confession. There is much about us that

needs to be drowned in the flood waters. And daily we rise with Christ to newness of life. In him we are renewed daily until “the final consummation when all earth’s kingdoms shall his kingdom be.” We do not make a cheap exercise out of this. We will have amends to make with people we have wronged and restitution to perform. We must face the consequences of our misdeeds. However, making amends and performing restitution do not clear our consciences. What is etched there is between God and us. God clears our consciences through Jesus. Proceeding from a clear conscience we make our pledge to God. Our pledge is not coerced, not a function of law, not to assuage guilt, not to earn us favor with God, and most certainly not to double our money back from God. Our pledge proceeds from the clear conscience that is God’s gift and God’s work.

God promised an abundant creation and gave his rainbow garment as pledge. God promised a new creation in Jesus Christ and gave us the Holy Spirit as a deposit on that promise. We promise to fear, love and trust God above all things and so to bring God’s kingly rule to bear in our lives and on this earth. As pledge we offer up our daily prayer, weekly worship, disciplined reading of Scripture, serving at Grace and beyond, nurturing Christian friendships, and first-fruit giving (not from what is leftover but first-fruit giving) of our time, talent and money. These Faith Promise cards, which we so boldly bring forward today, represent our pledges, proceeding from a conscience made clear through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.