FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

February 21, 2021

*“Journeys Beneath Dark Skies”*

I must begin by admitting: I am not one for wilderness treks. I deeply admire others’ photographs of soaring mountains, rolling desert dunes, and lush, green pathways into rainforests. Unfortunately, I am not one to lace-up my hiking boots and go along with them. I am not built for such adventures. I am more of the National Geographic kind of sojourner. Give me a video or a colorful magazine to flip through—that’s my kind of hiking.

I am making light of such endeavors, but I really do admire those brave souls who venture out into the wild, and I really would like to be one of them. In the meantime, I can double-down on my commitment to go on journeys with God. The one that God calls us to, on which does not require leaving the house, but does ask us to be as good as our word when it comes to being a person of faith. I can go on a Lenten journey with Christ. I can wander through the pages all of the stories of the Bible, like the ones that we just heard. And I can allow myself to be moved, just as God is moved to love and grace, as we see happening, especially in the story of Noah.

In some circles, Noah’s story might seem like an odd choice to begin a season in the church of quiet reflection and repentance. Noah, after all, is about an ark full of cute, cuddly animals, noisy animals—this is the way we mostly experience this story. We preserve the part about gathering all of the animals, and we turn it into a story that leads to decorations of children’s rooms and nurseries.

Of course, in order to do this we have to admit two important things about this story:

First, we need to conveniently neglect to read the build-up to the flood event. We need to neglect reading how corrupt and violent the world had become [Gen. 6:5, 11-12]. Genesis tells us that God looked around and saw nothing but viciousness and depravity of every kind everywhere among men and women, and *all* flesh—meaning that even the animal world, even *in* the animal world, something had gone wrong, too.

Second, in order to remember only the ark and the animals, we have to leave out all of the parts about destruction and death caused by the flood. We have to leave out God’s anger. We have to turn our gaze away from the sight of men, women, and children being swept away on the waves generated by the flood. We have to avert our eyes from the horses, dogs, cattle, and all the other creatures who float by the ark, struggling against the rising waters, their eyes filled with terror as they frantically search for dry land.

My point is that the story of Noah’s ark is not a children’s fairy tale. It is not just about the animals and people who were saved. It is also about the ones who were not saved. To forget about them is to pronounce our own judgment on them. Namely, that they “got what they deserved,” and therefore we need not think about what happened to them—but we do, just as God thought about them and was moved by their death.

This is a dark story—literally, a story filled with angry gray skies—it is meant to elicit real emotion, and to inspire real feelings of turmoil. It is even meant to help us experience—in our bones—what it means to live with God, and what it means for our lives when we turn from God’s way of truth and compassion.

To take this story seriously means we also read and remember the part where God sees all that has been destroyed and is regretful of it. Everything, every creature had been God’s own handiwork. To see it destroyed, to be the author of such widespread destruction made a profound impression even on our God—even God was touched by the darkness that had been visited on what was once a place of light and beauty, and a people who were so beloved.

We know this because the reading we heard tells us how—after the flood—God’s covenant promises that such destruction will never ever come again from God’s own hand. To seal this promise, God says that forever after, even if the skies are clouded and heavy with black clouds filled with rain, God will also put into the darkened sky a bright swath of color.

Forever after, dark skies will also contain a rainbow, and this will be a sign to us that God remembers the flood and what happened to God’s beloved people. And because God remembers, the rain will stop—it will not again destroy the whole earth and all of creation. God’s war bow will rise in the skies, the darkened skies, but it will be turned away from the earth, signaling God’s patience and grace.

What is astounding about this event is that Noah did not have anything to do with it. Indeed, no one ever says anything during God’s description of the covenant. All the responsibility for this covenant is laid on God’s shoulders.

God did not make Noah promise to “do better.” Indeed, as God is describing the covenant to Noah, God concedes that humans are likely to fail. [8:21] Despite knowing this, God promises never again to take such drastic measures—God is going to limit God’s own anger—forever.

No matter what kind of evil humankind may come up with, God’s promise is to never again respond with complete destruction. No matter how deeply God is grieved by what we do to each other, God will never again “give up” on us.

If there is nothing else you remember about this sermon, or even about Noah and his story of the flood, here is what I very much hope you will remember and think about: that despite everything God saw about Noah’s world; despite everything God has seen since the flood and the very way in which all creatures were destroyed, this touched God’s own heart. All of this destruction that God saw, this touched God, despite all of the devastation that human beings had already accomplished by themselves. Indeed, it seems to have broken God’s heart to see how such sorrow, a flood could bring such sorrow, upon God’s beloved people.

And in that moment, God realized that God’s love for us is stronger than even hurt and disappointment. What God realized is that love—the deep infinite love that *is* God—is also the source of the infinite hope that God has for humankind, and which we may have for ourselves and each other.

We can have hope because God’s love is steadfast and true. This is the first part of our good news, but there is more, which is why we also heard about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. We heard that story too.

You see: if God had left human beings the way they were, to continue to live there would have been no reason to change, or very little hope for us to have for ourselves, or in the future. So, instead of leaving us on our own, Jesus is sent to live among us, and to be baptized like all other human beings.

As he rises out of the baptismal waters the heavens are torn open and a voice claims him as God’s own. He is God’s beloved son. However, instead of installing him in the halls of comfort and power, Jesus is sent out into the wilderness—out into a place empty, a place where all security and ease are gone; into a place of depravation and uncertainty, where there are wild animals that threaten and provoke fear.

Yes, Jesus was sent to a place where he is ministered by angels, but it was also where Satan waits to entrap him—that is, Satan tried to make Jesus doubt his calling. For forty days and nights, Satan even tried to make Jesus doubt God’s faithfulness and righteousness.

This is the real wilderness Jesus faced and he did so because he knew that most of us live in our own kind of wilderness. We, too, live in a place where old comforts are vanishing, and the world often seems filled with violence, dishonesty, and chaos.

We live in a world where children starve, and war continues; where too many families live in their car, or in refugee camps; where one man kneels on the throat of another and loses his life, while another man kneels to call attention to such brutality and loses his job. This is our wilderness. All of this makes our lives feel very much like living under darkened skies before a thunderstorm—it looks destructive and frightening, and hopeless.

This is what Lent is for, to acknowledge that darkness. It is a time to acknowledge the wilderness we live in, and to remember and receive the help we need to escape it: by hearing how God deals with wilderness journeys—God delivers us; saves us from sinking into a watery death with a new beginning in a renewed land.

We are rescued through our walk with Christ which will take us on a harrowing journey through his passion, his cross, and even the darkened tomb, but are promised that we will emerge from even that darkness—like the way rainbows emerge from a murky skies—bringing light and new life; new hope, and steadfast love.

As I said earlier: I am (sadly) not one for going on hikes—especially beneath such gray, threatening skies. However, this is a journey I am determined to go on, this Lenten journey—after all, our Savior is leading the way. I pray we will all go together, too. May this be so. Amen.