

Sermon for Sept. 16, 2007 – The End of the Beginning

Genesis 7: 1-16

Matthew 26: 6-13

Just over two years ago, New Orleans, along with a significant portion of the coastlines of the rest of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama were wiped out by Hurricane Katrina. Part flood by rain, part flood by the ocean being pushed up onto the land, part flood by levees that failed, it brought home to many of us the enormity of watery chaos. The millions of folks who were flooded out by that storm had a taste of what it may have been like for Noah and his family, and his neighbors, when the waters of the flood came on the earth; when all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. Many of those who were flooded out are still not back – most of the Ninth Ward has not been rebuilt; in place of small, close together houses, there are now grassy, overgrown plots, where only foundations may be able to be made out. But rebuilding persists; those persistent folks view the flood as an end, but an end that also has a beginning, as they work for a rebirth of the Jazz City.

The flood images in the Genesis story also mark an end. In many ways, the Flood marks the end of the beginning. Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, were ten generations back – as far back as the Cole children from their ancestors who received their land in the land deed from King James. Lots of patriarchs and matriarchs in that time! In that time, a few people had strong relationships with God, most notably Enoch, who walked with God. But generally people had fallen away from God, and become corrupt. The flood marked the end of the beginning. The relationship between God and humans was primarily remote. But even then, a few sought out God – and Noah, a righteous man, was the one by whom God blessed humanity, as he and his family were saved, along with representatives of all of the animals of the world. This was the end of the beginning – God had been pretty remote from humans, and humans from God. The flood marked a significant change in the relationship God had with humanity, as He freely acted to voluntarily limit His behavior by stating that He would not flood the earth again. But today, we're not there yet – we're just at the end of the beginning, as the rain begins to fall and the fountains of the deep burst forth.

The anointing of Jesus by the unnamed woman (in other Gospels she is identified as Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, or Mary Magdalene) also marks the end of the beginning. Jesus has had a ministry of preaching, teaching and healing, and as part of that activity, He has challenged the authorities of the time to focus on THEIR relationships with God. He has been calling on them to keep the main thing the main thing, by living the spirit of the law and not only the letter. He knows that the call to repentance has not worked, that too many people are not willing to enter into a personal relationship with God. He knows that He is about to pay the price for that call. The end of the beginning is near – Jesus says that this woman is preparing His body for burial – but this is not the end. It's just the end of the beginning. The fallen relationship that humans have had with God since the Fall is about to be healed, through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The future relationship humans will be able to have with God because of this sacrifice is based on our model of the ideal parent-child relationship. God is our loving Father, and Jesus, our Lord, is also our older brother, who came that we might have life, a more abundant life. Jesus changed our relationship with God, and calls on us to be open to a changed relationship with God as well, through His act of grace.

Relationships run deep in the story of God and God's people, and so does change. God's relationship with His creation, and these human beings that He had made, changes. Humans

didn't change after the Flood, because on a fundamental level, we couldn't, as a whole, fully appreciate God's great faithfulness. Yet God has remained faithful to His promise to never again act to destroy the world – what we humans choose to do with and to the world remains to be seen. The Jewish people have tried to remain faithful to God's love, but too many times, especially in the Old Testament, that faithfulness played out more as a way to control their surroundings, rather than change and be transformed by their relationship with God, so that their surroundings would reflect that relationship. Paul especially writes about how the law, which God intended for good, came to be seen as an end in itself, rather than the way to draw close to God in this wonderful, faithful relationship that He continues to call the world to. And so Jesus came. Jesus showed us how to live in right relationship with God. He showed us how that right relationship with God could change the world. That change starts with acknowledging God's great faithfulness to us, and embarking on this wonderful relationship that God calls us to.

Last week I encouraged us to all write down acts of not so random kindness that others showed to us. I want us to continue to note those acts down, and also watch for the not so random acts of kindness that people offer to others. Today I want us to consider what single new not so random act of kindness that we will do, something that we don't normally do now. That might be parking further back in parking lots, for those of us who are physically able, to give space for people who are not so able, and for people with small children. That might be putting together a school kit, in conjunction with the children's Sunday School mission of the month. That might be calling someone who hasn't been in church much, or a friend who hasn't been around much, or someone from work who seems troubled, and offering a quiet, non-judgmental ear. For this one, all it really takes is presence – don't offer to fix their problem, just deeply listen. That might be biting back criticism, or not passing along something hurtful about someone else. That might be recognizing the small acts of not so random kindness that people offer every day, even if it IS part of their job – and thanking them for those acts instead of taking them for granted.

I'd like to encourage us to also consider one single thing that we can do that will help us to strengthen our relationship with God – that faithful relationship that God so yearns for us to enter into more deeply. What one thing can we try, to commit to, over the next several weeks that will help us to draw more closely to God, into the wonderful embrace of our Creator? For those, I'd like us to first ponder, and then, next week, to commit. I've reprinted copies of the spiritual disciplines that we circulated at Lent to stimulate us – consider them, and if there is one that perhaps you've practiced in the past, which has slipped away or gotten drowned out in the crush of life, that you want to reclaim, this is the time to do that. Next week we'll hand out short commitment forms with no names, asking you to write down that commitment. Put them in the collection plate, along with the acts of not so random kindness that you have already noted, so we can become more aware of how much God is moving in our lives to change and transform us, and through us, the world.

For us too, these days can be the end of the beginning – not because we experience natural disasters like floods, but because we choose to embark on a closer walk with God. The relationship that we are called to will change us because it HAS to change us. Change is not easy – it can be scary and time-consuming and disruptive. But God's faithfulness is so staggeringly great that we can respond. We can change the world, not because we are so good, but because God is so incredibly good. So let's mark the end of the beginning, as we work together to further the inbreaking of the kingdom of God until Jesus comes again. Even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Genesis 7: 1-16

Then the LORD said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.”

And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him. Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark, they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in.

Matthew 26: 6-13

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for Me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have Me. By pouring this ointment on My body she has prepared Me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”