

**1 Lent – Year B – March 1, 2009**  
**Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9, 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15**  
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So what do you think about the Loch Ness monster – myth or reality? In modern parlance, a myth often equates to a rumor, a lie, or an urban legend. One website has their top twenty-five urban legends listed. It includes Hercules the world's biggest dog – actually biggest fake out. Then there's free laptops from manufacturer Ericsson for passing along their email advertisement to eight other people – or not as is the truth. Also that the worst computer virus ever is being circulated as an attachment labeled “postcard” – not so! Are these the signs of our times: sensationalism, false advertising, and scare tactics?

On the other hand, there is another meaning to the word myth. Myths are also stories that many ancient and modern cultures use to explain how God interacts with the world and its inhabitants across the ages. Myths as cultural and Biblical stories are considered true and sacred to the religious tradition in which they are told. The deluge or flood myth is a great example. As Christians we have all heard the story of Noah and the Ark. If we were Hindu, the general theme is similar, although the details are quite different, and the name of Manu would feature prominently. In Greek mythology, the great flood myth is told as the story of Deucalian, and in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh the hero who tells the story is Utnapishtim. It's pretty interesting that so many different cultures of the ancient world have a story with a common flood theme? Clearly, it is a sign with great meaning then and now.

In the account from Genesis today, we have one of the last parts of the story of Noah and the flood. In the section just before today's reading, God blesses Noah and his family and tells them to “be fruitful and multiply”. This is a new beginning, after all was decimated in the great flood. What is particularly fascinating for you and I is that this whole reading is God speaking about God's self and the covenant He is making with Noah, his descendants, and all living creatures. In our Lenten journey, it is the first hint of what Jesus will accomplish for you, me, and all creation by His life, death, and resurrection. There are two aspects of this story that merit our consideration, especially for our Lenten reflections. They are both broad and narrow in scope, and are Lenten themes that will fill us with God's life-giving water, and cleanse us, freeing us for a closer walk with God and one another. The themes are reconciliation and signs.

Scripture is a lot more than just words on a page. It is dynamic, alive with possibility and meaning, and every generation is called to study the Word, grapple with it, be in conversation with tradition, and discern how God is speaking to us in our lives today. We get a nice big clue in today's reading that helps us to appreciate the meaning of the flood, as one of the foundational stories of our faith tradition. In the broader scenario, the flood story is a record of God's decision to wipe out humanity because of escalating violence and corruption. As the story unfolds, we realize that the flood did not affect every one or every thing that God had created and called “good” from the beginning of time. The righteous Noah and his family, along with all God's creatures that enter the ark are delivered from the torrent. With the benefit of hindsight, it should be no surprise to you and me that being right with God, leads to Life. That is a significant part of John the Baptist's and Jesus' Gospel of repentance. In our Baptismal Covenant, we all promise to repent and return to God when we fall into sin.

One piece of the good news for us all is that we learn today how God changes His mind about dealing with our sins. Of course, we know the rest of the story, in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but we don't want to rush to the resurrection without taking the time to appreciate and reflect on the teachings of Lent. Covenants are usually a two-way deal. But in this covenant, it is all God. In this universal covenant for humanity and all creation, God firmly and unequivocally tells us that something new is taking place. God knows we are helpless in our sinfulness, and every one of us carries the

inherent seeds of sin that all too often leads to violence. God's covenant with Noah tells us that God has determined to confront our sinfulness in a new way by offering us life. There is no question that we all continue to have the gift of free will, and so we are given the choice to accept God's gift or to decline. It is both a sign of God's infinite graciousness, and also a sign that God fully intends for us to have the time and opportunity for reconciliation.

The sign that God chooses is a bow in the clouds. Perhaps more by common usage than anything else, we take the meaning of 'bow' to be a rainbow, but that isn't the whole story. As is often the case, the fullness of the original language, in this case, Hebrew, gives us several meanings for the word, and one is an archer's bow. Furthermore, the bow is considered to be at rest, not draw in defense or aggression. In Jewish symbolism, the rainbow represents the manifestation of God's glory in the universe, as well as God's faithfulness to His covenant with humankind and all creation. As beautiful as rainbows are, we have to notice that in this story from Genesis, the rainbow is a memo to God from God. Personally, I get a real kick out of God wanting to leave Himself a memo. God's desire to accommodate His precious creation, and love us unconditionally is awe-inspiring. Rather like humbling Himself to walk among us in human form, so that we can truly get just how far God will go to show us the way, to care for us, and to help you and me to give and receive love, as Christ loves us. As we meditate and reflect on Scripture and on our own lives during Lent, this is one of God's greatest gifts for us to celebrate.

You know there is more. Every single time a rainbow shines with such breathtaking beauty, God is reading the sign of His faithfulness and remembering. God is also teaching you and me to read His signs too. I think this is why the Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Church at Rome that we really are without excuse for our rebellious tendency to turn away from God. Here's what he says, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things [God] has made." (Romans 1:20) It is the metaphorical sign of the two by four reminding you and me of our need to repent, and turn to God, and of our dependence on God. Novelist, Diana Wynne Jones once said, "If you take myth and ... things that speak in symbols, they can be interpreted in so many ways that although the actual image is clear enough, the interpretation is infinitely blurred, a sort of enormous rainbow of every possible color you could imagine." Perhaps it is infinitely blurry because we have poor eyesight when it comes to God and reading the signs He gives us. Or maybe the interpretation is blurred because we each are called to see and understand the signs according to God's will for my life and yours. Yet in our interconnectedness, most intimately as the Body of Christ, and more generally has the family of humanity, the colors and lines smudge together, mix and mingle to create a new picture, a new insight, a fresh creation, at any given instant.

I hope you agree it's an exciting way to begin Lent. Look at the gifts we have received today to take along with us. We have the sure and certain knowledge of God's grace, steadfast love and faithfulness. We receive the warm embrace of God's providential care, and His desire to bless us with life abundant. There is also the joy of learning how to read more of God's signs in our lives. The story of Noah is just one of the myths that are part of the Living Word, and written into our hearts like spiritual DNA. This week I invite us all to reflect on the signs of God's presence in our own lives and in this community, as our stories intermingle with one another's and find their place within the greatest story ever told.

Amen.