

## The First Sunday in Lent

February 21, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year B: Genesis 9:8–17; Psalm 25:3–9; Mark 1:9–13*

One of our adaptations in worship during the pandemic has been to use only one lesson before the gospel at Mass, except on the greater days of the church year like Christmas Day. The less time we are together, the less time there is for any of us who might be unaware that we were sick to pass on the virus.

That said, the preacher chooses the Old or New Testament lesson. Because the Old Testament lesson is chosen to show a Christian understanding of the continuum between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, that's what we usually hear.

On reflection, today's choice of God's pledge to Noah and his sons that there will never be another flood, like the one they survived, would not be my choice. God killed all humans except for Noah and his family—not the God that I know and worship.

Instead, I'd take us back to the beginning of Genesis, to the first creation story, the seven days of creation. We wouldn't need to hear the whole thing. I would have us begin with the first verse and end partway through the third day with these words, "And God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good."<sup>1</sup> In Mark, Jesus' coming up out of the water is the another beginning of God's new creation in Christ.

The appointed New Testament lesson that we didn't hear is from the book called the First Letter of Peter—for which there are many good reasons why it isn't by Peter the Apostle. But it is one of four New Testament

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:9–10.

books in which baptism is mentioned once. The word appears sixteen times in the Acts of the Apostles. The best of the four that use the word once is the epistle we hear at the Great Vigil of Easter from Paul's Letter to the Romans: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."<sup>2</sup>

My preference for today would be from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians that includes these words, "if any one (is) in Christ, that one (is) a new creation; the old passed away, behold the new has come."<sup>3</sup>

Matthew and Luke both use Mark's account of Jesus' baptism and add dialogues between Jesus and the devil. Mark's is short enough that I ask you to listen to the New Revised Standard Version of today's gospel, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus saw the heavens torn apart—the Greek verb here is *schizo*. In New Testament Greek, it carries the meaning of "to divide by use of force, split, divide, separate, tear apart, tear off."<sup>5</sup> It's the root of our English word "schizophrenia." The making of the earth by God was not a quiet phenomenon. The movement in our own time of land, seas, and the skies can overpower humanity. I do believe that our Christian hope is that nothing can separate us from the Risen Christ. Again, words from Romans: "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 6:4.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17. Translation: Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 91.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 1:9–13. NRSV

<sup>5</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.v.* "σχίζω," 981.

things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul wrote to the Romans who were living with the physical and painful suffering of persecution. We too live in an era when Christians suffer terrible persecution in many places of the world. Most of us did not expect the suffering the pandemic continues to bring around the world. I’ve said in sermons many times before that I don’t understand evil. But I do think I have, to quote words by the sixteenth-century Anglican bishop Jeremy Taylor, “confidence of a certain faith . . .and holy hope.”<sup>7</sup>

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:38–39.

<sup>7</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 504.