

Now is the time – Will Boyd

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Grace and Peace Be Multiplied Unto You!

The first lectionary reading for today will come from the Book called “In the beginning” by the Jews & labeled in the Septuagint as “Genesis” because it recounts the creation (or beginning) of the world and mankind.

Our second reading is found in the book fifth Century Church Scholar, St. Augustine, said contains the “language of Devotion” as Martin Luther called it the “Bible in Miniature”. With its 150 divisions of “songs” which are divided further into five books in the Hebrew Bible, each book seems to correspond with the Penteteuch (or first five books of the Bible). Ironically, we will be lifting our text from Book five, known as the Genesis Book of the Psalms—Psalms 1-41.

The third reading was written by an elder in Rome, often said in Christendom to be the one who served as “the mouth of the Apostles”. Most often this elder is said to be the apostle whose name symbolized that he “had relation” to a rock. This elder is referred to most commonly in one square mile of Rome as the 1st Bishop. This elder, bishop and saint identified with suffering. As the Gospel shares the account of Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law who was sick with the fever, Clemus Alexandrius said his wife “suffered martyrdom as he [Peter], said to his wife as she drew her final breaths, ‘Remember dear, our Lord”. No stranger to suffering, Jerome stated that Peter was crucified downwards, declaring himself to be unworthy to be crucified as his Lord.

Lastly, we’ll quickly quote a few verses from the Marcan narrative of the Baptism and Temptation of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Believed to have been written during or within five years of either the fall of Jerusalem and/or the persecutions of Christians by Nero, St. Mark is often credited for making the earliest “attempt to reduce the apostolic tradition of Jesus Christ into written form” as Nero was believed to be reducing Rome down to half its size by way of a disastrous fire.

Said differently, we shall reference the following this morning:

(The Noahic Covenant) Genesis 9:8-17

(David's Prayer for Guidance & Protection) Psalm 25:1-10

(The Apostle Peter's letter, teaching us about the blessedness of suffering for righteousness sake) 1 Peter 3:18-22

(Concluding with the Baptism, Temptation & Beginning of the Ministry of Our Lord/Savior, Jesus Christ) Mark 1:9-15

Sermon/Homily Title: "Now Is The Time"

As we step out of the time of the year in which we celebrate the accomplishments of African Americans, let us enter into March—a time known least for recognition Irish-Americans but perhaps most for the observance of the 1st week of lent.

Within the ninth chapter of the first book of the Pentateuch or the "book of new beginnings", we learn about the establishment of a covenant between God and mankind. Following many months of being cramped in tight quarters on a ship and without the amenities provided by God in the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, Noah found himself, seven other human souls and all creation embracing a promise from God above. While others drowned under the waters which flooded the whole earth, Noah's righteousness made him a prime candidate to rise above the situation at hand and serve at a higher level than most.

Specifically, this week's prescribed lectionary passages provide us with insight into the way God works to establish those in who seek to wait on him as described by David in Psalm 25—our second lectionary passage. Perusing through this passage, Genesis 9:8-17, I am both comforted and elated by the number of times I see words like establish, covenant, token, perpetual, remember, and everlasting. Each of these words in their respective positioning in the text speaks of some action taken by God to aid humanity in keeping all eyes fixed on Him—no matter the tests, trials or tribulations we face.

As even enemies begin to come in like a flood...be comforted because God has established covenants with his people. Pronounced "koom", the Hebrew word for "establish" means "to rise, settle, or succeed". Because Noah was willing to endure ridicule and "suffering for well doing" (as Jesus did according to the Apostle Peter in our third lectionary text, God made a covenant with all mankind as well as all creation—fowl, cattle and beasts.

For those of us recently involved with COR 401 team and are taking part in activities "for the beauty of the earth" this is creation care at its greatest. The God of the universe is establishing an ecological covenant with His creation. According to the Oxford Annotated Bible Footnotes,

we find in Genesis 9: 8-17, God guaranteeing “the preservation of the natural order from the powers of chaos”.

According to the second law of thermodynamics, entropy or the measure of disorder is always increasing. Even though our lives may seemingly appear less orderly and more chaotic, we should rest assured that God is yet interested in us being established. He is apparently still concerned at this hour about lifting us out of the muck and mire...out of dry cisterns...out of empty wells to solid ground where we can be “stablished, strengthened and settled”.

Seeking to be established, and not become overwhelmed by the cares of life, David stated in Psalm 25, “Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul”.

Pronounced “naw-saw” this primitive root (lift up) found in our second lectionary passage means “to lift (literally and figuratively), arise, advance, armor, suffer, to bear, lift (self) up, pardon, raise up, set up and even stir up”.

- During this time of lent, we lift our heads up to Him in prayer.
- During this time of lent, we lift our hearts and minds above the cravings of the flesh.
- During this time of lent, we lift our hands to give and to serve those who cannot do for themselves.
- During this time of lent, we are lifting our heads up to fix our eyes on Jesus through prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

In an earnest attempt to lift our souls closer to God, we are, at this time on the Christian calendar, abstaining from foods and festivities. For we recognize as proclaimed in both Genesis 9 and Psalm 25, mercy and truth is found along the paths of the Lord providing we keep his covenants and His testimonies—ever being mindful of His attestations.

While some have argued that favor is not fair, I have argued (sometimes with God) that life is not fair. Most, if not all of us, know that Noah was the only just man found to be perfect in his generations (Genesis 6:9). He even walked with God, yet this well-aged (or seasoned) man was required to take on a pain-staking project when he probably would have liked to be in retirement.

Before you feel sorry for Noah...I must point out that he was born to Lamech who was one hundred and eighty two years of age at the time Noah was born. Lamech gave Noah a name which means “rest or comfort”. He stated, “the same [Noah] shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because the ground with the Lord hath cursed”.

This was prophetic. Lamech named his own son and pronounced his role in creation care. Lamech gave his son a name and pronounced his destiny hundreds of years before he [Noah] appeased the wrath of “The Divine Warrior” (or King of Glory), causing Him to set down his bow

in the clouds as a sign of his perpetual covenant with man, promising not to again destroy the earth with water.

Before we return our focus to Noah let me point out that Lamech (and his wife) were still having children as 595 as he (Lamech) did not see death until the age of 777. Impressive!

I thought I started a family rather late, but Noah was over 500 years of age when his three sons (Shem, Ham & Japheth) were born!

Side note: The average human life span in 2008 was 66.12 years—almost double the average life span at birth for humans living during the Upper Paleolithic era. It would appear that our “three score and ten” would be but an hour to Patriarchs like Noah. Hence, I could not agree more with William Shakespeare that, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more...”.

Q: What are you doing with your hour?

Like thousands of others preaching from this week’s lectionary passages, I am seeking to draw you nearer and deeper—Nearer to the cross and His bleeding side—deeper into a relationship with Him that transcends the fear and dismay that may try to flood our souls from time to time.

At even this (kronos) hour, I want to bring to your remembrance God’s covenant with us.

Genesis 9:12 states, “This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and earth”.

Having a son and daughter who are respectively six and three years of age, it does not take much for me to visualize a token. No matter how weary or sick, at the mentioning of the name Chuck E. Cheese, their eyes are lifted and fixed on having a good time. In fact, because we celebrate their birthdays at Chuck E. Cheese’s, they are convinced that their birthdays are not official until we walk into that very place where there is a smell of cheap pizza, a woman waiting to stamp you with luminous ink, lifts flashing, coins dropping, arcade games chiming—all while small children are screaming and larger are laughing. That’s enough to make me look up and shout with hands lifted up—“Unto thee, Oh Lord, do I lift up my soul”J.

It is at Chuck E. Cheese that we exchange our money for tokens. In so many ways, we give up that which we work hard for to receive small monuments, memorials and reminders that we are in a different place. The token is embossed with the central figure of the establishment, serving as a reminder to those who leave before their time that they have visited a place where sorrows are drowned in fun and relaxation.

Undoubtedly, God has given us such a token. No matter how much rain falls in our lives, we can be comforted at the token we find in the clouds as the sun is reflected off of falling droplets of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. Even though we may occasionally find things precious to us washed away or even backed up and spilling over into other parts of our lives, we must take comfort in the fact that we've been given a token. We have received a covenant from God. We can reflect His glory no matter the rain that falls in our lives.

How do we overcome our fears as there are eminent threats of disasters around us or rumors of man seeking to taunt us reaching our bedchambers? In his prayer of preservation, David proclaimed that fearing God leads to our souls being at ease and our seed inheriting the earth.

Pronounced "yaw-ray", the Hebrew word for "fear" in the Old Testament is has one of two meanings. Fear (or "yaw-ray") is either a) the emotional and intellectual anticipation of harm or b) a very positive feeling we have in reverence of God according to the Key Word Study Bible. Hence, we can conclude that one can either be paralyzed by thoughts from the past conjured up in the psyche or moved to wait on the Lord with our souls lifted up to Him.

Rather than being overwhelmed by the evil activities of man as seen in Genesis 6 or "troubles of the heart" described in Psalm 25, David stated, "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will show them His covenant" (25:14). Fearing God (in reverence) and not fearing man (in terms of his ability to destroy the flesh), David goes on to say in Psalm 25:15, "Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord...".

It is in our third lectionary scripture, I Peter 3:18-22, where we find the Apostle Peter helping us keep our eyes fixed or ever toward the Lord even through suffering or the presence of evil. Making mention of Noah in the 20th verse of the third chapter, we find in 1 Peter, words which imply that God has not taken His eyes off of us.

In the midst of many evil generations, God found Noah. Pushing Samuel to go beyond the superficiality of choosing a king based on looks, God appeared to have His eyes focused on David—a "man after His own heart"...a man who wrote about fixing his eyes on the hills from whence came his help...rather than stooping over in the valleys where shadows of death seemingly reside.

With eyes fixed, David no doubt experienced heart ache and suffering. Though his heart panted after the living God, he was often:

- Desolate (25:16)
- Troubled in his heart due to his distresses (25:17)
- Afflicted and in pain (25:18)
- Taunted by many enemies who hated him w/ a "cruel hatred" or hatred of violence (25:19)

Yet, David was led to do what the Apostle Peter prescribes in 1 Peter 3. It appeared this King learned hundreds of years before the Apostle would pen it, "It is better, if the will of God be so, [to] suffer for well doing, than for evil doing".

As we experience trials and tribulations which occasionally tempt us to take our eyes off of the Lord, we must not forget the third practice of this time of lent, almsgiving or "justice towards our neighbor(s)". While our prayers may make mention of our justice towards God and our fasting may further strip our flesh of pleasure which leads to a justice toward self, we must remember the will of God for our lives which is to help "quicken" others who feel they have no hope of being lifted.

During this time of prayers to God, fasting, and almsgiving, let us strive to:

- Vitalize others through our kind words and our good works,
- Pull others to the shores of safety even as we feel overwhelmed by floods of discomfort, and
- Become arks of safety for the lost and destitute, beckoning them in to find assurance of salvation

During this time of prayers to God, fasting, and almsgiving, let us strive to:

- Reflect His glory after we've just had our parades rained on,
- Keep our eyes fixed above during times of fear and dismay that even sinners will look to Christ (in us) to find their way, and
- Have good consciences and conversations (in Christ) even as we are evil spoken of and falsely accused (as described) by the Apostle Peter.

We may not be commanded to build arks of gopher wood and pitch before waves of adversity swell...

We may not be required to preside over kingdoms as our families are in shambles...

We may not be required to circulate a pastoral epistle while loved ones fight for their lives or our city is going up in smoke...

But we may be tested, from time to time ashamed, and even suffer as we learn obedience experience deeper relationships with Christ.

Having deeper relationships with Christ we will be able to "hold our ground" through downpours that bring about weeping and pain as we keep our eyes fixed above, longing that "floods of joy over our souls like sea billows roll".

Just because our circumstances become chaotic does not mean our behavior must follow suit.

Rather, we must become even the more regimented and resolved to give “wholehearted service” to the master—engaging even the more in prayer, fasting and almsgiving during this time of the year.

While I cannot attest of his spiritual journey, I greatly admire the service rendered by a self-taught mathematician and astronomer named Benjamin Banneker. Born free to a slave father and a free mother, Banneker attended a private interracial institution. His genius was no doubt noted as he once became so fixated on a watch given to him by a traveling salesman that he took it apart and reassembled it repeatedly before constructing the first wooden clock in the United States in 1753.

Interestingly, Banneker’s fixation on time led to:

1. His construction of a clock which kept time, striking every hour for forty years
2. His calculation of the cycle of the 17-year locust
3. His authoring of an almanac that “computed the positions of celestial bodies at regular intervals”
4. His prediction of the eclipse of April 14, 1789

Though he could have made excuses about his past, he kept his eyes fixed on the time at hand.

Banneker’s fixation with time led to him becoming the first Black Presidential Appointee. In 1790 he was appointed by Thomas Jefferson to serve as surveyor on a six-man team charged with laying out our nation’s capitol. Following the dismissal of the team’s leader, Major Pierre Charles L’Enfant, Banneker reconstructed the plans for Washington, DC by memory!

I would submit to you...If we keep our eyes fixed on things which are above; God will give us the fortitude and wisdom to build up His kingdoms on Earth.

No matter how badly man breaks his promises; God has chosen to enter into covenant agreements with man!

No matter who runs off with the plans for our future God has a plan to save us from the power, penalty and presence of sin.

No...we cannot afford to allow memories of failures and injustices of yesterday to keep us from seeing God establishing and reconstructing in our lives today.

Rather, we must declare “Now is the time”.

While we are looking for the promise...we cannot afford to wait another forty days to sing “He lives”.

I know a risen savior
He's in the world today
I know that He is living
Whatever men may say
I see His hand of mercy
I hear the voice of cheer
And just the time I need Him
He's always here!

Now is the time!!!

Now it is time for us to repent and believe the Gospel, not in part, but in whole.

Not only forty days from now on Easter morning...but now is the time!

Now is the time to embrace Bonheoffer's "Cost of Discipleship"

Now is the time to squeeze God's token in our hands a little tighter with hope of a brighter day!

Now is the time!!!

Now is the time...for us, like Christ in our last lectionary passage found in Mark 1:9-15, to find ourselves "lifted out" of the murky waters of the Jordan and seeing heavens opened as God speaks to our hearts in prayer!

Now is the time!!!

Now is the time...for us to enter into forty days of temptation, remaining faithful, awaiting angels (or Christ Himself) to minister to us on the other side!

Now is the time!!!

Now is the time...hearing that others (like John in Jesus' day) have been placed in bondage we must press on to preach the liberating Gospel of the kingdom of Heaven!

Now is the time!!!!

Borrowing from Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand (or" has come near") repent ye, and believe the gospel".

Now is the time!!!

No matter whether you submit to the school of thought that "has come near" is a futurist eschatological statement implying His kingdom is approaching, but out there or you subscribe to the thinking of C.H. Dodd's realized eschatology which says His kingdom "is already here" ...Now is the time!!!!

NOW IS THE TIME!!!!

Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free?

NOW IS THE TIME!!!!

There's a cross for everyone. There is a cross for me.

NOW IS THE TIME!!!!

Now is the time for us to be CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST, entering into prayer, fasting and almsgiving....bearing one another's burdens and spreading the Good News of the crucified Christ who rose with all power in his hands!!!

NOW IS THE TIME!!!

Let us pray:

May we not experience paralysis induced by fear.

May we not become overwhelmed and in despair.

Let us actively wait as we await our deliverance from evil.

Let us keep our eyes focused on the Christ who descended into the deep to release the oppressed.

Let us keep our eyes fixed on "The Anointed One" who arose from the grave on the 3rd day.

We shall never forget the ultimate price paid by Jesus Christ as we evaluate the cost of discipleship.

We shall 'ever be mindful that now is the time to pray, fast, and give that God's kingdom comes & His Will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

AMEN.