

The church year begins with Advent and longing for the kingdom of God; it moves into the cycle of the Incarnation, and carries us forward to Good Friday and Easter. In the midst of that cycle comes the season of Lent. Here is a season of new beginnings that touches us where we live, in our everyday lives. We are invited—exhorted, even—to stop, take stock of where we are and who we are becoming, and then to begin again. “Repent, and return to the Lord.”

“If you do not change direction, you will end up where you are headed,” cautions a Chinese proverb. There is advice that *someone, many* someones, needed to hear and heed in recent years. Not only banks with “toxic assets,” or Wall Street firms and investors bent on profits, however much risk was involved—but all of us.

For the most part, I am fairly mystified by all this. But the other day on NPR I heard something that brought home to me that it’s not all about “them” but also about us. A Columbia Business School professor, a former banker, has charted consumer debt and gross domestic product, which for most of American history consumer debt has represented less than 50 per cent of the total U.S. economy. But between 2000 and 2008, consumer borrowing grew until it equaled the gross domestic product. Consumers—we—owe \$13 trillion (in mortgages, credit cards and other debt) when GDP is \$13 trillion. We already owe every dollar we’ve made. This has happened before, in 2007 and in 1929.¹ But who knew? Who was keeping track of where our rising standard of living, built on borrowed money, was leading?

So, now, painfully and with many losses, hoping that the policy changes the new administration proposes will be adopted and will work, we prepare to begin again.

As we always do: rising from a sick bed or recovering from an injury; taking steps toward healing a broken relationship; finding our way into a changed life after someone we love has died. Always we begin again. We may start over again in the same place, but not as entirely the same person, or the same people. We have changed, the world around us has changed, something may have been gained, something learned, even in the midst of loss. There is grace in new beginnings we hope, we trust. To begin again is the way of God, is it not?

¹NPR, Morning Edition 2/27/09, “Taxpayer Beware: Bank Bailout will Hurt,” by Adam Davidson and Alex Blumberg.

It’s also true that over the past 30 years wealth has been redistributed upward in the economy. That, too, might have something to do with the growth in consumer debt among people not in the highest income percentiles.

We came in this morning at the tail end of the story of the flood, from the Book of Genesis. God, Noah, his wife, their sons and their wives have been through a time of terrible devastation. Forty days and nights of rain; a flood that took more than a year to subside. Now the land was dry; there was vegetation. But the only living, breathing creatures anywhere were the eight human beings, and the animals, creeping things and birds that had been with them in the ark.

All creation had come very close to being completely destroyed, returned to the chaos–formless and void–that is all that was before God spoke creation into orderly being. And it was God who had done the destroying of that same creation. I still have the Little Golden Book of Noah and the Ark I grew up with; but this is not a story for children. The story is myth, not history; but how to wrap the mind around it? How to begin again when God has been the bringer of both weal and woe?

In the story of the flood, the Lord had seen “that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (6:6) and “the earth was filled with violence” (6:11). So, God had given up on creation, decided to destroy all the human beings and other creatures. .

But then God saw, or remembered, Noah, “who walked with God” and found favor in God’s sight. God changed God’s mind, decided to save Noah and his family, and with them male and female of all the animals. God decided to begin again. And when the flood waters had subsided and the land was dry, God established a solemn covenant with Noah: “that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, never again . . . never again.” (9:11, 15) Never again will God give up on human beings and the messes we make of ourselves and creation. Never again will God be the one to destroy what God has created, to return the earth to chaos.

What to make of this, God’s first covenant, universal and one-sided, binding God but not humankind who, God knew even at the time, would continue pretty much as before? After the flood, God had observed, “for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth;” and yet God determined never again to destroy every living creature.(8:21))

Perhaps we can make of it something like this: that we know that God is all-powerful and, thus, dangerous, to be feared, because we do not always “walk with God.” We do not live as we were created to be: in relationship with God, in peace with each other and creation. But we know more than that, as well: that God will go on being grieved, heartbroken by our violence and hardness of heart, but will never give up on us.

Take heart, because always God will begin again: with humankind and creation, as in the myth of the flood; in bringing Israel out of slavery, and out of exile; in Christ, reconciling the world to God’s self (2 Cor. 5:19); in welcoming our repentance and our returning to God, again and again.

In the story of the flood, everything that had breath was drowned because of human sin and violence; only Noah and those with him in the ark were saved, to make a

new beginning. In Mark, we hear of Jesus who went under the waters, baptized in the Jordan, to make a new beginning for all humankind.

As he came up out of the water he was anointed by the Spirit, blessed by the voice of the Father, and then immediately driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness. There is a fierceness here that may remind us of the God of the flood. But if the Spirit is fierce, it is for life against death, for good against evil. The mission of God's Beloved is to enter into a cosmic struggle against evil, sin and death that will end on the cross before he is raised again to new life.

And so, before he went proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God come near, he was tested by Satan, that fallen angel, the disturber, accuser, troubler of men. (The Greek has shades of meaning: tempted, put on trial, tested, put to the test.) This was the beginning of Jesus' standing against everything that draws us away from God, all that would, and does, stir chaos into the good order of God's creation.

Mark leaves the shape of the testing to our imaginations, unlike Matthew and Luke who say more. They set forth three temptations: turn stones to bread; be spectacular; worship me (Satan), rule, have glory. Mark says only, "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

I have wondered about those wild beasts. There would seem to be danger there; but Mark, a writer of few words, wrote that Jesus was *with* the wild beasts. Neither the wild beasts, nor the angels, are governed by, subject to, the ways of human beings. They exist outside the institutions, rules, structures we make for ourselves.

So maybe, even as Jesus was being served by the angels (fed? as the prophet Elijah was fed by God's agent in the wilderness?), he was taking in the wildness of the beasts and of the wilderness itself, to take back with him. Something, maybe, of the way creation was in the beginning? That may be stretching it a bit, but certainly he proved to be a threatening presence as he confronted and was confronted by those in authority back in civilization, who had made their own way that did not seem to be God's way.

Wilderness was the place where Israel had learned, however imperfectly and sporadically, to leave behind the ways of Egypt and slavery, and to trust and depend on God alone. Under the waters of baptism in the Jordan, Jesus had died to all the ways of humanity that are *not* of God, all our old ways of sin. Then he was driven into the wilderness to be *tempered* for his return, to live in the world but not be of it. To die on the cross and be raised again so that we might begin again with God as God, in him, begins again with us.

Here we are, setting out once more on the pilgrim way of Lent. Not *driven* into the wilderness, but setting out again in trust and hope toward the One whose promise is to make all things new. As we go, we face into our failures and sorrow, we will meet challenges and dangers on the way. But we travel with the assurance that the Lord who

goes with us is irrevocably committed to life—in the covenant between God and all flesh after the flood, and in the new covenant in Christ’s blood, for the forgiveness of sins. And we prepare ourselves to renew our own baptismal covenant, at the great Feast of the Resurrection, taking time, paying attention to where we are and who we are becoming, so that where we are heading is back toward God—if that is truly where we mean to go.