

First Sunday of Lent

When I was a young man, I once had a boss who got very angry with me. He yelled at me. He verbally abused me. I remember feeling deeply hurt and terribly confused. Today I realize I was doing some things that needed correction. But nobody has a right to abuse somebody else out of anger.

According to the bible, even God learned this lesson. In the sixth chapter of the Book of Genesis - near the beginning of the very first book of the bible - God saw that the human beings he lovingly created desired nothing but evil. God regretted making human beings and decided to destroy them - together with all the animals, even though they were innocent. Noah, however, was righteous and blameless, so God decided to start creation all over again with him. God told Noah to build an ark. Noah did. God told Noah to get onto the ark with his family and pairs of animals. They did. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. The great flood destroyed all other living things. The rains stopped. Noah's ark floated on the waters for 150 days more. God remembered Noah and created wind. The waters subsided, but it took another year before Noah could leave the ark on dry land.

That is where today's first reading picks up the story. God tells Noah, "I'll never do this again. I make a covenant with you and with every living creature, and I put a reminder to myself in the sky." With the flood, all creation felt that God had stretched an arrow on a string, ready to shoot from the sky. But now, when clouds gather and rain threatens, God sets down his arrow, upends his bow away from the earth and paints it bright colors. God could destroy us all again, but the rainbow reminds God to show us mercy.

Our relationship with God is a covenant, not a contract. A contract makes a fair deal for two parties. Every time you buy something, you want your money's worth. Every purchase is a contract. But a covenant is not based on equal measures. Marriage is a covenant because partners give themselves completely to each other out of love, not to get something in return. Our relationship with God could never be a contract. Even though we sometimes bargain with God, God holds all the power. God doesn't have to make a contract with us. What could we pay that God does not already own? But God loves us and makes a covenant with us. God gives us life and promises eternal life if we do his will.

After Noah's ark, God promised not to abuse us again in anger. We sometimes get angry at people we love. We sometimes abuse them with our words. We break our covenant with them. We can do better, but we are weak. We need a sign to remind us how to act. The eucharistic prayer that I'll use today implies that the sign that God gave Noah reappears in the cross of Jesus Christ. It says, "His arms were outstretched between heaven and earth to become the lasting sign of your covenant." The cross is the new rainbow.

In our relationships, when clouds gather and storms threaten, we need a reminder of the covenant we have made with the people we love. Do you have a cross on the wall of your home? Look at it. Jesus Christ had every reason to be angry with us because time and again we have broken God's covenant. But Jesus did not act in anger. He acted in love. He stretched out the rainbow of his arms for the people he loved, and he invites us to do the same.