

February 18, 2024  
1 Corinthians 13:4-13  
Genesis 9:8-17

## The Promise of Love and Safety

This Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent. From this past Wednesday, February 14, until Easter on March 31, we will be in a season of reflection and self-examination. We will ask ourselves, do we love God with all our heart and mind and strength? And do we love our neighbors as ourselves? As we journey toward Holy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning, we will ask if we are truly loving as the Lord asks us to love.

During this season of Lent, we will be focusing on Jesus' commandment, that we love one another as he loved us. Because love is the point of everything. Because God so loves the world. Because Jesus lays down his life for love. Because love overcomes death and the grave. And it will do so for us too. So why isn't love everything to us? Why aren't we better at love in our everyday lives? Why aren't we, as Christians, known for love and being experts at connecting with our families or our neighbors? During these 40 days, I want us to consider those questions. And how we might be better at loving as Jesus loved.

Love is where everything starts with God. God brought everything into being because of love and connected it and breathed into it and gave it life. And that love in the beginning was exciting and it was new. The first blush of love always is. It's like getting an adorable new puppy. Or finding that perfect dream home. Or it's like noticing that special someone who notices you too. And so begins the magic thrilling romance. Your life will be perfect. Your home will finally be organized and magazine-beautiful. Your new puppy will look so cute in sweaters and it will never eat your shoes or bark at 2 in the morning. In the beginning, that's what love is like.

And in the beginning of creation, that's how things started. Everything was wonderful and amazing. God was pleased with every bit of it; the stars, the sun, the moon. The earth, full of trees and mountains and oceans and fish and birds and flowers and animals. And then humans. It was beautiful. It was full of possibility, a dream come true. For about a day and a half. Then the humans started being human. They started thinking and feeling. They wanted to know things and have a say in things. And those first people that God loved, Adam and Eve, they

weren't the obedient creatures of God's imagined. They turned on each other. They turned on God. And their children did too. God's beautiful dream of creation fell apart.

Reality hit. The innocence of everything was lost. Feelings were hurt. Hearts got broken. God and humanity couldn't stay in the childlike Garden of Eden anymore. The first story of the Bible is the story of love's first gift and love's first disappointment. The story of God and humanity will not be a fairytale. It will be difficult to love and we will be imperfect. And if God is going to love us, then God will have to love us as we are.

Love means acceptance. It means recognizing where you are and where others need you to be with them. It means providing a safe place-- a secure place-- where we can trust that we won't be harmed. Psychologist Abraham Maslow says safety is one of our most fundamental human needs. Right after food and water and sleep. It's feeling safe. If we want love to flourish, then people need to know they won't be attacked; they won't have to defend themselves. They won't have to always be vigilant, ready to fight or flee. We need a sanctuary where we can let our blood

pressure drop and our minds relax. Where, instead of clutching ourselves inward, we can open up. And share ourselves and reach beyond ourselves. To love, we first have to know that it's safe.

Love protects us. It keeps us out of harm's way. It shelters us dependably and reliably. Perfect love casts out fear, it says in the Bible in the letter of 1 John. Love, says Paul to the Corinthians, does not blast others with boastfulness or arrogance or rudeness. It does not leave others fearing a harsh comment or anxiously waiting for an outburst of rage. It does not leave people feeling unsteady or unsure if they will get kindness or anger. Love is trustworthy and consistent and assures us there is nothing to be afraid of.

That's what the story of Noah is about today. It's a story about knowing we are safe with God. At first, it looks like children's story about a zoo of animals and people who are stuck together on an ark for 40 days and nights. It seems sweet and innocence. But behind the story is a lot of destruction and fear. Imagine a great flood wiping out all of life. Imagine thinking that God did this. Imagine being told that the world deserved

this because human beings are wicked and horrible and that this is what a loving God does to address it.

A friend of mine who grew up in an evangelical church said she was taught that God's anger and God's love were the same thing. That God harming people meant that God was good. And these conflicting things didn't make sense to her, but they made sense to God. Deep down, she felt afraid of God. She was afraid that God would harm her; that God would reject her for some unknown sin. And she would only have herself to blame. Her church rehearsed the reasons for God's wrath and affirmed God's hatred of the world. It reminded her of how lucky she was to have Jesus' mercy. Like an abusive husband, it threatened her that if she ever left, it would never take her back and she would never find anyone else to take her in. She eventually left the church and never went back. Why would she? She never felt loved. She never felt safe.

Noah's story is about the disappointment of love. It uses a natural disaster to make people think about their part in a broken world, a lesson for us in a time of global climate change. But when this divine ordeal is over and the damage is done, God regrets playing a part in it. When the

waters recede and the harm is evident, God must answer for God's self: "Is this what God does? Is this who God is? Will I hurt others when I am hurt? Will I love others only when I am loved?" God must decide. If God will be the God of love, then God can't be the God of wrath. So God promises NEVER do this again. Like when a parent who sees the look on their child's face when they have lost their temper, God promises God will not destroy things again. God doesn't want us to live in fear. God doesn't want us cowering or hiding or distancing ourselves from God. God will be a strong fortress. A solid rock. A place where we are safe. Where we can love and be loved.

We need to feel safe with God in order to love God. And we need to feel safe with one another in order to love one another. That means we don't do things that hurt each other. We don't make fun of each other. We don't take our frustrations out on others. Yes, we all have feelings. We get upset sometimes. But we don't let those feelings burn the world down. We don't put others at risk. We talk, we communicate. We check in with each other. We recognize our feelings as feelings, and they will pass. Love is still love. God is still God. And we are safe.

Too often, religion hasn't been safe. Emotions have gotten the better of us. People get worked up about wickedness. They become angry and direct that anger toward what they fear. It's one of the devil's tricks to make us blame others and scapegoat others, to draw us in to hate.

Convincing us that our hate is from God. That this is what God wants.

And we forget God's very first promise to Noah and to us that the world is safe from God's wrath. That God has promised that God will never destroy us again. That instead, God will take all the wrath in the world and take it into himself. God will take all of our hurt feelings and broken hearts. God will take our anger and hate. God, in Jesus Christ, will take on all of it on the cross. He takes it into his body and is broken by it and destroyed by it, so we don't have to be. But on Easter morning, he rises again because the love of God can't be wiped out or extinguished. And instead of coming to us with wrath and retribution and blame, he comes with mercy and forgiveness.

Love lets us know we are safe. God's love protects us and promises us that we will be all right. And as God's community, we maintain that promise. We try to be that place where people can see that God's grace

never fails. And that this is a place of grace for everyone, a sanctuary for everyone. Here, we can be ourselves and admit our need. Here we can struggle and question and have honest conversation. Here we don't have to pretend. We don't have to be on guard or defensive or wary and waiting for someone to strike a blow. And we make sure it's the same for everyone. That's the first promise of love, to make sure those we love feel safe.

Jesus has commanded us to love one another; as he has loved us. So let us do that during this season of Lent. Let us know that God is our refuge and let us be a refuge for one another. Let us know that God's love is a safe place and let us be a safe place for one another. Let us look out for one another. Let us make room for one another. Let us care for the things about one another that are tender and fragile. Let us protect the spirits among us that are vulnerable or hearts are broken. Let us be a fortress of kindness where all may find protection and security. And we may feel safe at home in the love of God.