

Homily First Sunday of Lent ('18)

The Rainbow Sign

I couldn't hear today's passage from Genesis without thinking of James Baldwin's book **The Fire Next Time**, his essay on race relations in America, which takes its title from a lyric in the Black Spiritual, "Mary, Don't You Weep." It reads, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water the fire next time." Published in 1963, the book was eerily prophetic of the conflagration that raced across the country and the city of Washington five years later after the assassination of Martin Luther King.

The first essay in Baldwin's book, "A Letter to My Nephew," is an account of his conversion to Christianity and his later disillusionment and alienation from the church, including a critique of Catholicism. My recollections of Baldwin comes at a time when, thanks to Ray Kemp, our theological reading group at Georgetown is reading a series of books on Black theology, where, because we all talk so much, we are stretching out our discussion of James Cone's small, moving book **The Spirituals and the Blues** over two months.

Whereas Baldwin grew embittered, moving from Harlem to self-imposed exile in Paris, Cone stayed on at New York's Union Theological Seminary to be a leader in Black Liberation Theology. But for white American Catholics reading **The Spiritual and the Blues** or the Black Catholic theology of Shawn Copeland or Bryan Massingale requires an exile, a move into the desert of slavery,

segregation and Black suffering, not easy for us. That's true especially at Georgetown where we are still dealing with painful slowness with the legacy of slavery in an island of privilege. Reading **The Spiritual and the Blues** has driven home to me the truth of Ta-Nehisi Coates' **Between the World and Me**, that it is near-impossible for us whites to know the burden of being a man in a black body in America.

In hearing the good news of the Noah story that "there shall not be another flood to devastate [the whole of] the earth," we forget too easily the back story of sin which set Noah to building his ark and escaping the deluge with his family and that improbably large menagerie. Behind God's rescue of Noah lay divine frustration at humanity's enormous collective sinfulness.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil—continually. And the Lord saw he was sorry that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him to his heart. (Gen. 6:5-6)

Before we can take joy in the rainbow sign, we must confront, not just our own petty sins, but the world's sinfulness. In our time in the Lenten desert we must comprehend how great a weight of sin lays on this, our world. For us Americans, as Gunnar Myrdal said, racism remains our original sin, and yet we continue to deny it. After all the police killings of the past three years, Black lives don't matter. After hundreds of children gunned down in their schools, we can't ban even assault weapons. With tens of millions of

homeless refugees, thousands more every day, world leaders refuse to make a serious commitment to a new refugee regime. After driving half earth's species into extinction in just the last fifty years, we can't restrain our consumption and our corporations' won't control their greed to preserve life on earth for future generations. They are conspiring inspiring with Scott Pruitt to roll back regulations that had begun to protect of land, air and water.

God's covenant with Noah was a covenant with all the Earth, "with every living creature." The rainbow signifies a covenant of hope for all creation. "Behold," God tells Noah and his sons, "I establish my covenant with you and all your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you" (Gen. 8:7-10). But neither class 5 hurricanes, nor record floods, nor drought, nor fire can persuade Donald Trump to re-join the Climate Covenant. Cape Town is about to be without water. Teheran and major Indian cities are fast approaching the same point, and yet we let global warming grow still higher.

The warming oceans are acidifying; freshwater is awash in genetic-damaging hormones, and the seas and sea creatures are poisoned with plastic. Vast regions of plastic micro-beads circulate the earth, and larger plastic trash strangles and impairs ocean-going birds, sea mammals and larger sea creatures. The oceans, rivers and lakes, with all Nature, testify to humanity's indifference to our terrestrial home, and our sin. The immensity of our offense confronts us. We don't have to imagine souls going down into hell to

realize the weight of sin afflicting this world. The signs are everywhere around us. We live in a desert of humanity's making where the very creation groans with us for redemption from the sin we have made.

The Judean desert where the Spirit "drove" Jesus, as Mark tells us, is an arid, stony place. Novelists have pictured it as a place of madness and fevered dreams. But the Spirit made it a place of insight where Jesus could see the sin of the world and simultaneously comprehend God's unfailing love for all God had made. It was also a time for testing, for recognizing his own weakness, and in the Spirit strengthening his commitment to *Abba* and his own mission.

At the beginning of Lent, the desert is the place where the bright air brings us clarity of mind, where under the vast dome of heaven we meet God, and where, as we swim in the great river of stars which flows across the sky, we find purity of heart. In the desert, we both perceive the vastness of the world's sin and comprehend the limitless depths of God's love. It is that twin experience born of the desert that prepares us to return to the world. It is there we can see the rainbow sign as a pledge of hope in the covenant God has made "with every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth" (Gen. 9:16). We need to feel the weight of the world's sin in which we all participate, but before we return from the desert to the world, we need all the more to feel the lightness of being which is found in intimate knowledge of the immensity of God's love for all creation.