

Sermon – Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15
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Grace Lutheran Church
1 Lent – Year B
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“Caught in the Reign”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This past Monday morning, I arrived early to the office. I had a scheduled call with our mission partners in Martin, Slovakia. When the call was over, I was dumbfounded to discover that our building had gone dark, quiet. The various office staff members were nowhere to be found. Odd for a Monday morning; odd for any time during the workday. I went up the stairs to say good morning to my favorite German teacher, only to find her door locked and the lights out. Coming back to my office, it dawned on me that we were in the middle of a lockdown drill, practicing how to respond to an active shooter in our building. I had two immediate thoughts. First, we should probably invest in a security detail for the senior pastor. After all, I’m kind of a big deal, and I shouldn’t be trusted to keep myself safe. And second, that I’m incredibly grateful that we practice for this scenario. Knowing the drill, I pictured where each of my children was at that moment as they prepared for the unthinkable. Our four-year old and our six-year old were each with their teachers and peers, hidden from sight. So, too, our eight-year-old daughter. She told me later that part of the training for her classroom involved which students would need to step up in their hiding space so that their feet wouldn’t be visible to a shooter seeking to do them harm. I thought about how infinitely sad it is that my three children, not to mention the other 200-plus students and their teachers at Grace, have to practice for such an event. But so it goes in this world in which we live.

2. My first draft of this sermon was filled with what you've come to expect from me: funny jokes and witty repartee, followed by my trademark theological brilliance. *Ahem*. I mean, it was going to be great. And then the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School happened on Wednesday – Valentine's Day, Ash Wednesday – and, well, the sermon I was going to preach now rings hollow. Seventeen people, seventeen children of God, were gunned down by a young man, another child of God, with a legally purchased AR-15. And maybe, maybe you're shifting uncomfortably in your pew right now. Maybe you're thinking that the last thing you want is a political sermon. Rest assured, you're not going to get one today. I have zero interest in advancing or negating one or another political argument. That said, the gospel of our God is intensely political – not in the sense of being partisan, but because God cares about the affairs of the polis, the state. And if God doesn't have anything to say about the deaths of seventeen people, from fourteen-year old innocents to heroic teachers and coaches, then I don't know what we're doing here. If God has nothing to say about this, if God desires that nothing be done about this, we'd be better off staying home on this and every other Sunday, reading the *New York Times* over brunch.
3. Today marks the First Sunday in Lent, our yearly remembrance of Jesus' confrontation with Satan in the wilderness. This is a word we need. We live in the wilderness, the Wild West, where evil and violence stalk their pray, aided and abetted by our sinful indifference, our inability to do anything about it. One might expect God to do what Genesis tells us God once did when God looked upon the creation and saw, unmistakably, "that every inclination of the thought of their hearts was only evil." And so God, the God of justice, broke open the heavens and let the waters rush in for forty days. But God's act is not, finally, one of destruction; it is a re-creation, a new beginning: new life brought forth from the flood. It is, finally an act of mercy, as God sets a bow in the skies as a promise that such a divine act will never again occur.

God, in the flood, sets aside justice and chooses instead grace and mercy as the means by which God will deal with humanity.

4. Of course, Noah and his descendants don't fare much better than those who came before. But God's course is set, a course of grace and mercy, a course of standing with humans against the evil that assails us from without and wells up from within. So it is that God, rather than looking upon our sinfulness and enacting justice, enters instead into the human story, incarnate in the Son, Jesus Christ. Instead of sending a flood, Jesus goes under the floodwaters of the Jordan. Instead of the heavens torn open with a new flood, the heavens are torn open with a word of promise: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Instead of watching from a distance, offering up thoughts and prayers for the people, God in Christ comes to stand with and for the people, for you and for me, to beat back the forces of sin and death. Instead of sending a destructive rain, God initiates a liberating reign. And in Jesus, sin, death, and the devil are defeated. Once and for all. Full stop.

5. On Wednesday, the same day Nikolas Cruz gunned down his peers and his teachers, you and I were marked with crosses of ash. We were reminded of our sin and our mortality, but we were also reminded that our mortality is now cross-shaped and our sins are forgiven. For just as Jesus came out of the Jordan dripping with God's love, so too have we come out of the baptismal flood wet with the life-giving reign that is the Kingdom of God. The Word and the water of baptism are salvation for us, grounded in nothing less than the resurrection of Jesus Christ that has vanquished death forever. And so it is that we can commend these seventeen victims, and all victims of gun violence, including Chicago's own Commander Bauer, into the life of eternity and abundance that is now theirs. Their dying is not their ending, for Christ is alive and his Kingdom will not be thwarted.

6. In the midst of this good news is our call. It is never enough to say only that God triumphs over sin and death for the sake of the next world, for the Kingdom of God is for this world, too. Why else would Jesus say repent? Why else would Jesus have us turn from our sin and seek to enact God's life-giving reign in this world, too? This is what Lent is for. We do not simply rehearse the story of God's victory over death; we live it out. For if we have been made alive in Christ, we have nothing to live for except life itself – life in fullness, dignity, and safety for all of God's people. *Today*. This Lent, God calls you to the discipline of repentance. Perhaps, just perhaps, God is calling us to give up our smug certainty about the right course of action. In the past few days, we have heard and read of why this or that response wouldn't work, couldn't curb the violence we endure. Gun control won't really solve the problem, we hear, because mental health services are the real issue. Or is it an absence of good parenting? Maybe the problem is access to violent video games and the media's glorification of violence. Others pine for some golden age in which people were kinder, and if we could all just be more empathetic, our societal ills would go away. Every camp, every politician, has a reason for why their vested interest isn't really to blame, and so we end up doing nothing at all.
7. But what does Jesus say? Repent, and believe the good news. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and give up your need to be right, your need for your political view to come out on top. I believe that better gun control laws are the place to start, but perhaps they wouldn't solve every problem. Maybe quality care for those struggling with mental health issues isn't enough. Maybe being more compassionate isn't the answer. But maybe – and I'm no policy expert – maybe instead of finding paralysis as we debate which answer is best, just maybe we could try *all of them at the same time* – gun control *and* access to mental health services *and* better parenting *and* more compassion; let's try all the things! Jesus calls us to repent, and that means starting with ourselves and the sin that lurks within us, manifest in our need to be right before we try. Because when I look at my children, and at your

children, I don't see young people in need of our debates. I see children of God in need of Jesus followers who are bold enough to admit that we don't know which answer will be the right one. I see children of God for whom it is worth trying absolutely everything. Thanks be to God that the victory over sin and death is already won by the Christ who walked into the wilderness and stared Satan down. The victory is won. So why stand on the sidelines debating? Repent, and believe the good news. Believing, try everything. Believing, *do something*. Jesus has claimed these little ones as his own by giving up his life. As we await the joy of Easter morning, perhaps our repentance means doing any and everything we can to prevent more little ones from giving up their lives, too. God in Christ has chosen grace and mercy. God has chosen life. Awaiting Easter, may we choose life, too. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.