

**American Lutheran Church of Sun City**  
**First Sunday of Lent**  
**February 17 - February 18, 2024**  
**Pastor Scott Klimke**

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Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

As an entryway into our reading from Mark, I want to start with our reading from Genesis. In this reading, we find an example of the self-emptying character of God which the New Testament will later lift as a virtue for us to emulate. With respect to self-emptying, we know that God is free, sovereign, and almighty in every imaginable way. We ourselves aren't nearly this free, powerful, or influential, but we do often have multiple choices available to us. Though not to the same degree, we, like God, have options. But when we make the self-emptying character of God our own, we limit our freedom and the options available to us so that we don't end up harming others. It's precisely what God does in our reading from Genesis.

Appalled and alarmed by the depth of human sin and our deep-seated inclination towards division rather than harmony and cooperation, God in essence started over with the flood. But hitting the restart button through the flood didn't work. Noah and his family were still human when they got off the ark and it wouldn't take long for it to show, with God smelling more sin and division before they appeared. This left God in a pickle. God could try to start over again with a new make and model other than our own. Or God could limit God's options; not starting over but sticking with us through thick and thin. Our first reading's words about the symbolism and significance of rainbows tell us God chose the second option. Rather than giving up on us

and starting all over with a new model and make, as could have happened, God self-emptied and self-limited. God freely surrendered options and did it all for our sake; hoping that we might be led to follow suit at least some of the time when reducing the options available to us might work to the advantage of others. And as the Bible continues, we learn God would do far more than just put up with us. Never ceasing to be with us, God would also choose to be for us always too; from time to time making things better than we could ever make them ourselves. It's a helpful, for us disposition that our reading from Mark likely wishes to accentuate when it describes Jesus as "the Beloved."

In the Greek version of the Old Testament used by the early Church which came into widespread use about one hundred and sixty years before the birth of Jesus, the Greek word for "beloved" is often used as a replacement word for what means "only son" in the Old Testament's original Hebrew. If the writer of the gospel of Mark knew this, Jesus' identity as "the Beloved" might be meant to tell us that his role in salvation history and the kingdom of God is a one-of-a-kind, never to be repeated or reprised role. But even more significant is this. In the early Church's Bible, the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, the word "beloved" shows up in one place more than in any other and that's in Genesis chapter twenty-two where Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his beloved, and only son Isaac, only to have God at the last minute provide a ram instead; in the process demonstrating that the Lord shall provide what we should never be expected to provide or what we, in fact, could never provide due to the limitations of our make and model. And with the identification of Jesus as "the Beloved" recalling this pivotal and important revelation, it's quite likely the gospel of Mark is trying to tell us that in Jesus God has provided and is providing all that we can't or shouldn't have to provide ourselves. Lo and behold, today Jesus withstands temptation like Adam and Eve failed to do

when they were hanging out with the beasts and like Israel later failed to do during its forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, this is all confirmed. Thankfully, joyfully, blessedly, we don't have to be church alone; falling and rising according to our vacillations between faith and fear. Through Jesus "the Beloved," through Jesus the reminder of the Lord's provision and the provision itself, there's grace to pick us up every time we fall and also the grace to supply what we can't supply ourselves. But I must stress that the degree to which we will experience this grace will be impacted by the way we go about our business here at ALC.

This becomes clear when we spend a minute with how our reading from Mark tells us that in the coming of Jesus, the time is fulfilled. The idea behind this notice is that we have a time and God has a time and the two can conflict. In Greek, there are two different words for time. There's "Chronos" which means "normal time" or "our time" and then there's "Kairos" which means "God's time." And yes, it's "Kairos" not "Chronos" which shows up today. Jesus isn't beholden to our calendar but to God's calendar. And with this the case, discerning Jesus' presence or absence, discerning Jesus' approval or disapproval, discerning whether it's God's time or our time, becomes paramount and mission-critical if there ever was such a thing. And from the very start, Christian discernment has been communal discernment.

On the first Easter, all but Thomas was present when Jesus appeared with post-Easter gifts and marching orders, with Thomas also present with the whole community when Jesus came back again the following Sunday. On the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to the gathered community, not to individual disciples scattered here and there. With discerning whether it's God's time or our time so often the difference between ministry that flies and ministry that flops, it's quite advisable not to forget or to skip over the communal character of Christian discernment. To channel the words of a hymn that became a country and Western

anthem, the difference between ministry that lasts and ministry that languishes is almost always the presence or absence of circles of shared discernment that won't break when sin and every other force opposed to God and the good come calling with everything they've got. But before strong and durable circles of shared discernment can emerge, there has to be a congregation or a community where people know one another, trust one another, and are willing to be vulnerable with one another. And even when this kind of community or congregation exists, sometimes discernment is held up because something is missing that can only be supplied by those who aren't a part of the community yet.

The potential for all the hands we need not to be on deck when we need them reveals an added side benefit of doing evangelism. Wanting everyone to have a forgiving, freeing and fortifying relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith, we invite, welcome, feed, and include not to fill the offering plate and not to post impressive attendance stats. No, after a relationship with Christ, the motivation for each one reaching one as often as possible is to get all the hands we need on deck so that we might create the strongest, most durable circles of shared discernment possible. And as for fostering a deep and genuine community here at ALC, it can and should be done in all kinds of ways. For now, I'll just mention that a good option would be to make the fellowship hour between Sunday services and the new Bible study being held between Sunday services "can't miss events" where people grow more acquainted and where no one ever, ever, ever sits alone. That's why I hope a good number of us will complete the fellowship hour survey available this week so that what's often called our "coffee hour" does become and remains a "can't-miss event" where no one sits alone and where strangers and passing acquaintances become lifelong friends, even after other friends have moved away or fallen asleep in the Lord. Together, let's place a real premium on coming together

to form the ties that bind, as we also always remain on the lookout for those who aren't here yet.

If and when it happens, we shall be positioned well to practice the communal discernment most

able to identify when it's God's time instead of our time. Amen!