

THE JOURNEY OF LENT

As Lent begins, we start, with Christians across the world, a journey. Our destination is Jerusalem, where the shadow of a cross stretches across the landscape on a Friday afternoon, and where angels show some women an empty tomb on Sunday morning. The motivation to take this Lenten pilgrimage rests in God's faithfulness toward us. This is what it means to refer to God's covenant with us. In Genesis 9:8-17 we are told that, after the flood, God makes a covenant with the whole of creation. It consists of a promise and a sign. The promise is that the earth will not again be destroyed by a deluge. The sign, the reminder which helps us to recall the promise, is the rainbow.

For Christians, God's covenant love is perfectly revealed in Jesus, who is both the loving promise of God to us and the physical sign of divine activity in our midst. In Christ we start over, even as the earth began anew, refreshed when the waters of the flood receded. The promise and the sign given us in Christ are reinforced by many other signs. The water of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist are principal signs given to the church. By using them, we can see still other evidences of God's goodness in our experience. The signs say to us "Get going. Head to Jerusalem." But along the way we often get distracted and wander down side paths. We grow weary and decide to take a nap. Some even to set up permanent residence, without venturing further. How grateful Noah must have been when the internment in the ark was ended, when the earth was renewed! You would think that all that he experienced would prod him to continue the faithful living he must have found in all that God had freely given. However the bible tells us that, instead of being spurred on to fuller activity for God, Noah retreated and, indeed, dropped out. He abused divine goodness. And so do we, even if our ways of doing this differ. We settle down on our couches for what we consider a well-earned rest. Spared from devastation, from the curse of sin, given the gift of renewal and refreshment, we drop out, or at least grow woefully sluggish. And no wonder, for it is a great task we are given. We are to see the whole of creation as God's beloved handiwork. We are called to cry out against injustice

and to labor actively for the welfare of every living thing. We are to care for people of every sort (including many we may not particularly like personally). We have vast work to do if we would keep the covenant, and often we grow weary, or lazy, or just disconnected.

And so Christ offers us this gracious gift of Lent, with its annual summons "Get on your way. Leave your couch of self-indulgence and head back for the road. Come, follow me to Jerusalem." Yes, it is an upward way, sometimes steep and stony. However the One who calls us to follow is the same One who endured temptation, fasting for forty days, tempted by Satan in the company of wild beast. (Mark 1:9-15) Like Noah in that crowded, stinking boat, Jesus had no pleasant time of it, and promises none to us. But as Noah was given a new creation, flowering and fair so Mark tells us that Jesus was cared for in the desert by the very angels who "waited on him." We too shall be cared for all along the way.

Come, then. Together we can enter on this pilgrimage and make our upward way to Jerusalem with strength and hope. At the destination we shall find on a desolate hill a saving cross, and empty tomb in a flowering garden.

The Rev. Bert Eaton is Rector of St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church , located at 503 W. Broad St. in Swansboro.