May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strong rock and our redeemer.

Well, here we are again. We have reached the season of Lent, still distanced by the pandemic. It feels as though we have been traversing the wilderness for almost a year now, and I admit, I am tired. I am wearied by the mind's desire to make things seem normal with a body that cries out to rest. And I know I am not alone in that.

It is fitting that this first Sunday in Lent in this particular year provides us with the story of God's covenant with Noah after the flood. We all know the story, having learned it from childhood, perhaps sung songs about it, seen picture books and movies about it. God is sad for having created humanity because God sees that every inclination of humanity's heart is evil and there is much violence in the world as a result. And so God decides to destroy God's creation with a massive flood. But God sees the righteousness of Noah and determines to save him and his family, tasking them with the caretaking of all the species of animals and birds, as well as plants of all kinds. So God tells Noah to build an ark in which these animals, plants, and Noah's family will reside. And although we read that it rains for forty days and forty nights, we know that there is time that lapses while the earth is covered in water, and more time as the waters begin to subside. Ancient rabbinic literature suggests that Noah and his family were kept in the isolation of the ark for a year (Genesis Rabbah 30:6). Put another way, Noah had access only to his own family bubble for the duration of the time on the ark. Sound painfully familiar? But although he may have felt alone in terms of human community, being only with his family, he was far from alone, and in fact, faced an incredible amount of work as caretaker of those creatures God ordained him to save. That same rabbinic literature states that Noah did not sleep during the twelve months aboard the ark, because he was constantly working to care for the animals (Genesis Rabbah 30:6). He and his family had to be intimately aware of the needs of the creatures aboard the ark – knowing when and how often to feed them, knowing how to keep them apart from each other, knowing what they might need, not just to survive, but to thrive. As the Rev. Kevin Bates told us in his interpretation of this story at the Creation Care Symposium last month, Noah had to fall in love with these creatures, to know them in a way that can only happen when in relationship with an other. He posed the question – how do we learn to fall in love with creation, not just to admire it? But before we can get to that question, there is another thread of the story that must be addressed.

As we heard in today's reading, God makes a covenant to never again flood the entire earth. This covenant is made to Noah and his descendants, as well as to all the living creatures that were on the ark. God makes the sign of the covenant a bow in the sky, marking the relinquishment of God's weapon of destruction in favor of relationship with humanity and the rest of God's creation. And this is wonderful news!

But right after this Noah plants a vineyard, makes wine, and becomes drunk, leaving himself exposed and vulnerable. We don't often talk of this part of the story. It's not pretty, it's not particularly good. But our current circumstances may be the perfect time to reflect upon this epilogue to the flood story. Remember, Noah has been without sleep because of the extreme amount of work it takes to care for the creatures he has been responsible for. He has endured isolation with his family for a year. He has witnessed the mass destruction of all he has ever

known. This is an extremely traumatic experience, and our songs and children's stories have a way of sanitizing and erasing the full impact of it. But today's world is situated in a way that might help us come closer to understanding Noah's perspective. We have been asked for the past year to wear masks and to stay physically apart as much as possible, while witnessing the loss of almost 2.5 million people worldwide to the COVID-19 pandemic (according to Johns Hopkins University). We have seen climate shifts resulting in greater fires and floods, and in the past weeks power outages across Texas due to unprecedented freezing temperatures. We have seen violence from wars, coups, and contested elections. We have seen oppression of people with black and brown skin, and murder of those people with impunity. We, like Noah, are sitting in the space of global trauma, surrounded by others who are also in that space of trauma. And when that trauma goes unaddressed, it has a way of replicating itself. We see this in Noah's story. Noah's son, Ham, finds his father naked in his tent and he goes to tell his brothers of his discovery. His brothers cover their father's nakedness without looking upon him, maintaining his honor. When Noah hears of Ham's action, he curses not Ham, but Ham's son, Canaan, marking his own grandson and the generations following as slaves to the other sons and their descendants. And it is this passage that served as justification for the enslavement of people of African descent, because Ham was said to have been dark-skinned. The trauma becomes generational. And it becomes cyclical.

So, to recap, we have a story of ecological devastation prompted by the actions and inactions of humans, and the resulting trauma response being to perpetuate that trauma to the next generations, which begins a cycle that we witness throughout our biblical narrative – a cycle that ends, in our tradition, on the cross and in an empty tomb. And yet, because of those cycles and our own unexamined and unacknowledged trauma, we still see the impact today – in our use of these trauma responses as justification for further trauma upon people of color, indigenous people, people of differing abilities, of differing gender identities and sexual orientations, and upon the natural world.

But it does not end there. Because covenant is not a one-way street. God continues to reach out to humanity again and again because of this initial covenant of hanging up God's weapon in the sky. Throughout history, God continues reaching out - making another covenant with Abraham and his descendants, codifying the covenant with Moses in the ten commandments, and embodying the covenant we witness in today's Gospel reading from Mark, the covenant of baptism that we participate in and that we recommit to at the end of the season of Lent every year.

Like Noah, another story of water, with Jesus breaking forth from the parting waters of baptism to be greeted by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, the same bird species that informed Noah that dry land had been found, and a voice calling out, *You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased*. The Trinity arriving on the scene at the opening of Mark's Gospel, showing us the covenant we commit to as Christians and the configuration of God we use to perform it. And immediately after this covenantal image, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and tempted by Satan. And although we do not know in Mark's Gospel how Jesus is tempted, we can surmise how through our own experiences of temptation and through the exploration of Noah's story we just heard. Jesus spends his forty days with the wild beasts, echoing Noah's care of the creatures

on the ark, but Jesus has angels waiting upon him, a significant difference between the two stories.

So how do we resolve the trauma? How do we heal to keep from perpetuating the cycle ourselves? I want to be clear that getting professional help is a very real and necessary way to heal from some kinds of trauma, and there is no shame in the need of or receiving of that help. In the context of our faith and spiritual tradition, though, the last verses from our Gospel passage today provides a beginning answer to those questions. Jesus returns from the wilderness to Galilee, coming with news, the *good news of God…saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'* Repent! That beautiful Greek word, *metanoia*. A word that can mean "the journey of changing one's mind, heart, self, or way of life. Spiritual conversion." What an incredibly beautiful and powerful word! Most often when people hear the word "repent" or "repentance," they think of an action, typically made at one point in time, that then restores one to relationship with God. It also has a tendency to evoke the feeling of shame or guilt in many people. However, the dynamic of metanoia is deeper, calling us to a process, to a journey. It is not a one-time event that must be repeated over and over again, but rather a spiritual discipline that involves life-long amendment of life. As the definition states, it is a spiritual conversion, a conversion that I like to think spirals into deeper and deeper levels as one's heart, mind, self, soul, or way of life wakes up to more intricate and loving layers. It involves making the space to reorient, to process, and to heal from the wounds we have experienced and the wounds we have created. That change and growth occurs as we continue to orient our lives toward that kingdom of God that Jesus tells us has come near. That kingdom of God that places us, the rest of creation, and God – in that beautiful dance of Trinity – into our own dance of Trinity. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love of self. All bound together by that simple but not easy action and state of being called Love.

Maybe, in this time of being apart from one another, we can work towards the healing of our own trauma by rekindling a relationship with creation – by learning to know the names of the birds and the trees, by learning the history of the peoples of the lands we live on, by observing the flow of the water in our watershed, by falling in love with creation rather than just admiring it. I invite you, at this start of our Lenten journey, to imagine our planet Earth as but one drop of water in the sea of all that God has created in this vast cosmos. What if our planet was the ark that Noah was given to care for? What if we understand ourselves as the caretakers of this ark? How are we doing in the work of caring for those creatures as the expanse of the sea of space surrounds us? And how might that time looking after this creation, dwelling in it, observing it, and falling in love with it, give us the space to heal our wounds into scars? Take this time of standing apart to learn to love – the earth, all that is within it, including yourself, so that when we return from the wilderness and gather once more, we will have developed practices that can heal us all.

Amen.