

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
March 1, 2009  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Solutions to Overcoming Sin,  
Genesis 9: 8-17, I Peter 3: 18-22, Mark 1: 9-15

Are you a problem solver? Most likely each of us is or we would not still be alive. Seeking solutions to problems has been a driving force of every living thing since God created the heavens and the earth. All of God's creation has had to find a way to adapt in order to survive the changes that occur in the world around them. Finding solutions to problems still drives us today.

The problem we will seek a solution to this first Sunday in Lent is sin. We often joke about sin or have funny stories that involve sin. After I had served a church in Bentleyville, PA for three years, an older member remarked to me one Sunday, "I never knew what sin was until you came here." Make of that as you will.

Sin is really not a joking matter, but a very serious problem. Sin is usually defined in the Bible as an act of disobedience to God. An expanded definition of sin that most of the world would agree to is: "Sin is a shameful, deplorable or utterly wrong act." Even people who do not believe in God are seeking solutions to sin, however it is defined, because all acts of sin are destructive to all aspects of creation in some manner. All sins are equal in God's eyes, despite how little or large the consequences, because they are all acts of disobedience to him. Sin is a very serious problem that needs solutions to overcome it. (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary)

In today's scriptures there is a common thread running through them that lifts up God's solutions to overcoming sin. The thread is God's unconditional grace. Through today's Bible stories let us follow the common thread.

Before God decided on unconditional grace as a solution to overcoming sin, he tried something else in the time of Noah. In Noah's day, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." God was also sorry he made "animals and creeping things and birds of the air" for sin had permeated their lives, too. So God's solution then was to tear open the heavens and flood the whole earth, kill everything off and begin again. There was one exception, "Noah, who found favor in the sight of the LORD." God had Noah, and his family, build an Ark on which they survived the flood. God also had them load it with two of every kind of animal in order to repopulate the world. God's solution to overcoming sin at that time was to tear open the heavens, flood the whole earth and kill off almost every living thing because they were so evil. (Genesis 6)

When the flooding rains ended, God had Noah send out a dove to bring back signs of dry land. The dove did just that by returning with an olive branch in its beak. At this point as we heard read from Genesis, God decided that using a part of his creation, water, to destroy the world, and all that dwelt therein was not the best solution to overcoming sin. Such death and destruction caused by God's anger deeply grieved

God. So out of unconditional grace or love, God decided to begin again. The dove's success and the olive branch were the first signs that God was backing off of his punishment and seeking a new solution to overcoming sin.

The first step taken in the new solution to overcoming sin was God making a covenant with Noah. The Lord promised Noah that such world-wide destruction by water would never happen again. No matter what human beings do, such suffering will "never again" be caused by my anger, promised God. "Never again" means that with this promise, God breaks the cause-and-effect relationship between sin and God responding with retribution to cause such world-wide suffering. The flood was the clearest example of how, if humans sinned, God would punish them with death and destruction. The covenant God makes with Noah now makes clear once and for all that any future world-wide suffering does not arise from God's punishment of sin. "Never again," said God, "would this catastrophe happen. God's relationship to us is now based on unconditional grace. This is my promise to you," God told Noah. This promise of "never again" and a new relationship with God of unconditional grace was and still is God's solution to overcoming sin. Walter Brueggemann, [Genesis](#), pg 84

God then pointed out that, from now on, the rainbow that appears in the sky after a storm would remind God of the covenant or promise he made to never again use water in the form of a world-wide flood as a solution to overcome sin. The use of the rainbow is significant here because the bow and arrow were the weapons of war back in Noah's day. The rainbow was now seen as an unstrung bow that could no longer be used in war. The rainbow was a reminder that no longer was God going to use water as a weapon of retribution to overcome sin. Now God was a God of unconditional grace, a God who would overcome sin by means other than the total destruction of the world by water drowning it out in a catastrophic flood. God was and is the God of the unstrung bow of peace that appears in the sky after a storm.

Centuries later in the continuing story thread that began in Genesis, we see how God backed up the promise he made to Noah not to use retribution and God-caused suffering as a solution to overcome sin. God also furthered the evidence that God uses unconditional grace as the means to defeat sin instead of revenge. We read of this in Mark where God sent his Son, Jesus to earth. In Jesus, God came to live among humanity for unfortunately God's creation was still committing sins. God had always lived up to his part of the covenant, but humankind continued to ignore and abuse God's unconditional grace. Humanity's sinfulness kept creating more unnecessary suffering in the first century A.D., just as it does today. Like us, they needed God to intervene to back up his promises made to Noah, and have his unconditional grace be the solution to overcoming our sin. In his Son, Jesus, God gave humanity his unconditional grace as the solution to overcoming sin.

Again, God began the process by using water as an outward sign of a solution to overcoming sin, but this time in a loving peaceful way. He had his son, Jesus baptized, not that Jesus needed to repent of any sins, but that Jesus was showing us the way to come clean before God—to repent inwardly and then outwardly show this in our baptism. Again, God tore open the heavens, not to flood us out, but instead to send the Holy Spirit like a dove, a dove of peace and affirmation upon Jesus. It was another sign

of God's unconditional grace coming to us in Jesus as a solution to overcoming sin, the same grace as in the time of Noah. God, again, began the process by using water as an outward sign of a solution to overcoming sin, but this time in a loving peaceful way in his son, Jesus.

Yet, humanity still did not respond well to God's solution to overcoming sin, even with the living God walking, teaching and healing among them. Our desire to disobey God and sin is like a hungry beast that lives within us that tempts us so successfully to run toward the wilderness of self and world destruction. Since Jesus was God and man at the same time, he had to face these same struggles and temptations. He even had to go face to face with the master tempter, Satan, in the wilderness surrounded by beasts of all kinds. He had to fight this pull of evil all of his life like we do. Only unlike us, he was successful at not sinning. Jesus was obedient to God, and successfully resisted becoming a part of the evil that leads only to self and world destruction. But still humanity did not respond well to God's solution to overcoming sin, even with the living God walking, teaching and healing among them.

For God's solution of unconditional grace and love to finally overcome sin, as we heard from I Peter, someone had to fight evil, had to suffer and die in the battle to stop the power of sin, and its partner, eternal death, that have such a grip upon us. This time, instead of all of humanity and nature dying, God took the punishment for us in Jesus. He suffered and died on the cross for our sins. To show that he had won the battle, God raised him from the dead and has seated him as the power over all other powers in the universe. Because of what God did for us in Jesus, God's solution to overcoming sin, his unconditional grace, is victorious. Sin and eternal death do not have the last word on our lives, God in Jesus Christ does and he gave his life to make it happen.

I Peter tells us in a couple of mysterious verses that Jesus was so serious about being totally victorious over sin and eternal death that between his crucifixion and resurrection he went to preach to the spirits in prison. As we say in the Apostles' Creed, "he descended to hell." He went to hell to redeem, to save, and to restore to God the lost souls who had fallen into evil ways. He could have left them there, but that is not what God's solution of unconditional grace is about. It is about saving all of humanity and creation from all of sin and its power of total destruction.

As a further speculation on this, Tom W. Boyd, a Presbyterian professor of Philosophy and Religion, shared an insight in a sermon entitled "Going To Hell For the Right Reasons." I have shared this story with you before but it illustrates the point so well. Boyd writes, "A friend of mine, John, wrote a short story about Jesus' descent into hell. Fascinated with the question on why Jesus went to hell, John first did some research. One dominant legend from the Middle Ages, he found, is that Jesus went to release Adam and Eve from Torment. Others say it was the people who died in the great flood. John found this interpretation inadequate, not radical enough."

"In (my friend) John's story, Jesus shows up at the gate of hell. Satan meets him in rage, trying to forbid Jesus entering. Jesus cannot be restrained. He tears open the gate and begins his search. As he probes the darkest and most sinister recesses of torment, he releases everyone he finds, but it is clear that he is in the quest of some

particular one. He hunts ever deeper, ever more strained, into the bowels of ultimate treachery. Finally, far back and away from all other prisons, Jesus finds a cage in horrifying isolation. He approaches it, and as he does so, Satan cries, 'No, not that one! That is my prize!' Oblivious to Satan's objections, Jesus wrenches open the door of the cage and sets the prisoner...sets Judas (the one who betrayed Jesus and hung himself)...free." When I get into my own private hell, Jesus always finds a way to set me free. How about you? (From Best Sermons by James W. Cox, pg. 252)

After all we have heard today about what God has done for us; after all the struggling and suffering God in Jesus Christ has gone through to make his solution to overcoming sin, his unconditional grace effective on our behalf; let us listen again to how he wants us to respond in this place, in this very minute. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent"—stop giving into evil, turn to the ways of God, believe in the good news." Come believe in Jesus Christ who is the good news. Remember your baptism wherein your sins have been washed away by the water God uses to save us. By the water of baptism your conscience has been made clean, and you have been claimed by the victorious team known as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To celebrate this overcoming of sin by the solution known as God's unconditional grace, Jesus invites all who believe in him to his table to eat with him, and remember what he has done for us.

God's solution to overcoming sin is why we celebrate Lent. It is a thread of unconditional grace we need to follow every day as long as we live on this earth.