

First Reading from Genesis chapter 9 verses 8 through 15.

""God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations; I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.'"

Second Reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter chapter 3 verses 18-22

"Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison. In former times these did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

Baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you - not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him."

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Gospel Reading from Mark chapter 1 verse 12 through 15

"After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

And so there you have it. God is a genocidal maniac who demands a human sacrifice because we can't figure out the rules and, if we do, we can't live by them. Sin. Sin is a hot topic. I have it on good authority that you and I are intrinsically disordered and inclined to evil. We're not just tainted with original sin, whatever that happens to be, but we're extra special messed up because, for some reason, we get love wrong. We get it so wrong that it's not even love when we do it. It's an act.

I have to be honest with you, now, and admit that I think it's a waste of my time, and your time, thinking about sin and repenting from sin and asking for forgiveness for sins. We don't know what sin is. We can't trust other people to tell us what sin is and scripture is, as usual, enigmatic at best.

That was easy. And it accomplishes nothing, really.

So let's approach the unapproachable and at least decide what we're not talking about. What ever sin is it's not mere violations of the rules or making erroneous ethical decisions. Do you know about ethical decision making? Here's a short course. There are five big systems of ethical thought you'll study in an ethics class. Ready for the list. I should have made power point slides. Utilitarianism, Moral Rights theory, Fairness which can also be called Justice, Common good, and virtue. Breathe a sigh of relief. I'm not going to describe them all and tell you how to apply them. So, after midterms and you have figured out each of the ethical systems you get to ethical decision making. New list. Ready. OK. First, is this actually an ethical issue or merely a matter of practical choice? 2. What are the facts of the matter. 3. Which ethical system should I

apply or which approach does the least harm and the most good? Now that's a utilitarian criterion but just about everybody uses it. 4. Make a choice and test it before it is implemented. In ethics, most of the testing is done with thought experiments and looking at history. 5. Take action.

Remember why we're talking about this ethics business. Sin is not what happens when you take action or make decisions that are erroneous or unethical. Errors are just that--errors, mistakes, screw-ups. Maybe you should have none better but it's still an error. Errors usually result in their own consequences and sometimes there are process and accountability issues. Unethical behaviors, however, mean there is knowledge, foresight and willful disregard of established ethical principles. That's why soldier's can't blame their superiors when crimes against humanity are committed. That's why abortion sends people into spasms. Everybody's using the same process to arrive at a conclusion and disputing the facts.

What errors and ethical decision making don't tell us is how this effects our relationship to God. In order to make sense out of sin we have to bring God into the equation. This is a church. We're allowed to do that. Now, Does believing that there are many pathways into the presence of the Divine also imply that there are just as many paths away from the Divine presence? I don't know. I hope not. I think the Divine throws itself in front of us pretty much where ever we decide to go. But I acknowledge that if I'm helping people walk a path then there is the possibility that paths can be abandoned or the traveler can get lost. I'm still not so sure that's sin. That sounds like exploration to me. Here's one thing though. What if you sabotage

someone else's journey. What if you put roadblocks in their way and try to lead them off the path? Now that sounds like sin to me. I want to be careful here because it would be easy to get caught in a trap that says anything anybody does in the name of religion is OK and I can't critique them. We know that doesn't work. Let's remember, human sacrifice, forced conversions and genocide. All paths are not created equal.

If I'm going to make statements about someone else's path I'm going to have to rev up my ethical decision making. Yes. This is an ethical issue. What are my facts? Here are the facts I need. What does this path say about the Divine? Does the Divine as described by this path do things that don't feel right, that don't seem to pass the ethics test? What kind of person do I have to be to follow this path? Does it harm my humanity, my loved ones, my community? What I'm doing is taking the different ethical models and seeing if the person on the path and the presence I'm going to seek behave ethically. The reason I'm doing that is because I've finally discovered a model for sin. Sin only happens when the my relationship with the Divine is at risk. Sin only happens when I threaten other people's relationship with the Divine. Sin usually happens when I accept an impulse or hearsay or habit and act like it's the word of the Divine without reflecting on it and testing it and verifying it with my community.

Here we are. Lent starts Wednesday. Repent. Rend your hearts not your garments because there are a lot of things being done in the name of Jesus that make me ashamed to call myself a Christian. Those things are sin and we need to make that clear to people. We have a responsibility to ourselves and to the Divine.

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