

Lent 1, 21 February 2021
Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15
Called to DEEP Relationship
First Mennonite Church

Once again the Lenten season is upon us, and our **pandemic-laden** theme for this year is “Deep Calls to Deep”, taken from Psalm 42:7. I say pandemic-laden because so many of us have struggled this past year with some aspect of the **depth of life**. Whether we’ve had a loved one, friend, or colleague suffer with COVID-19, we’ve all spent time concerned about our own health or wellbeing; we’ve spent time concerned with what the future holds; and, we’ve all spent more time with ourselves—pondering our thoughts, feelings, and

reactions to events. This pandemic has made it almost impossible not to live a “deep” life. Currently we’re all looking inward, outward, and all around us in ways we haven’t before. By doing so, I trust God is working so that we move from the superficial to the profound.

The hope for this season of Lent is to have us go deeper. Today, it’s going deeper in our relationships.

And with any relationship, it’s good to know where we stand, what is our role. Today we have this story of Jesus being knee-deep in Jordon waters, hearing a voice saying, this is **my beloved son**. Here in the waters of the Jordon River, Jesus’ identity was made visible, audible, known to Jesus.

As disciples of Jesus, this is something I want you to hear this morning. I want you to hear that we too are beloved sons and daughters of God. You are. I am. We all are beloved sons and daughters of God. To claim this as our own, we must deepen our relationship with God.

Before I explore this further, I want to remind you of God’s commitment to a **deeper relationship**, not just with you and me, but with all of creation. We can find promise of this in the flood story.



On a **superficial** level, the story of Noah and the flood is not a story of relationship but more like a biblical infomercial for the SPCA. When we skim-read the story, we get side-tracked with questions like:

- How could Noah possibly keep all the animals, birds, and insects fed and watered for 40 days and 40 nights?
- How many litres of water does it take to cover the earth?

These questions, along with a trip to Kentucky to visit the Ark Encounter theme park, will only keep you in the shallows, will **side-track**, **prevent you** from going deeper.



You see, God called the world into existence to be God's faithful covenant partner. God had this grand notion that the world which God called into existence would be a world where there was unity, harmony, peace, and goodness. And God's creation, you, me, and the creatures too, were supposed to enjoy this wonderful place, because it was so **GOOD**.

Yet God's intention for creation went off the rails. Creation resisted being what it was supposed to be, breaking the relationship, creating a fracture between God's desire for creation and creations' desire to do its own thing.

God's dilemma is what to do about a world bent on going its separate way? How will God bring his created order back to how God originally intended creation to be?

God concluded the world betrayed God's trust.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth (Genesis 6:11-12)

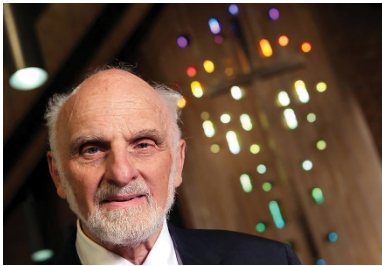
Not long ago in Genesis we read, "it was very good"; Now we come to a point where God decides to end the human experiment:

I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air...(Genesis 6:7)

Because God loves the world so much God can't just blot out from the earth all living things. So, God decides to save Noah, animals, and insects—a remnant of the created order. Noah isn't perfect, but Noah finds favour with God.

But saving this remnant doesn't solve the initial problem of evil and violence. It doesn't take long for the same flawed, human inclination to rebel, to mess up, to bubble up once again in the human story. We know about Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, but then there is Noah, and then . . . you and me.

Friends, this story is **not about a change brought about in human beings**. If it is, then the responsibility of making the world turn out right will fall on us. I've been around long enough to know not to put too much hope and faith in our human abilities.



Walter Brueggemann, in his commentary on Genesis, said this about the flood story. **...the focus of the story is not on the flood but upon the change wrought in God which makes possible a new beginning for creation** (Genesis p 73).

In other words, this story drives home the point that it was God who had a change of heart. After the flood, when God smelled the sweet aroma coming from Noah's sacrifice, Genesis says,

The Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. (Genesis 8:21)

Something happened to the heart of God. God decided not to wipe out the world. God vowed to never again use violence to change humans, never again to use force to restore the world to how God intended it from the beginning. Instead of blotting out, God chose to **deepen the relationship** by entering the pain and fracture of the world to begin something new. One sign of this lies with the saving of Noah, his family, and the zoo of animals. A second sign is the rainbow. We often see the



rainbow as a sign for **us**—of God's promise to never again destroy the world. But if you read your Bibles carefully and deeply, you will see that the rainbow—which is really a bow without the arrow—isn't for us, but for God.

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 (Genesis 9:13-15a).*

The bow in the sky is there for God. The bow in the clouds is a reminder to God never again to wipe out creation. Never again to end the human experiment. It's there as a reminder to God to deepen the relationship.

And the coming of Jesus into the world is another sign of God's commitment to deepen the relationship. Jesus bursts upon the scene in Judea to announce that the kingdom of God is at hand. No violence. No manipulation or coercion, but an invitation for everyone to repent and become followers of Jesus. Once again God took the initiative to deepen the relationship.

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' You and me are all beloved sons and daughters of God. Our great spiritual task is to claim that and to live our lives based on this knowledge. And that's not very easy—in fact, many of us fail to claim this truth of who we are, in large part because there are so many groups and philosophies ready and willing to tell you who you are. Who am I?

One common answer is, **you are what you do**. This is very real. Success in life leads to confidence and feeling good about your life. Failure can lead to depression and feeling bad about your life. When I worked in Asia with MCC I was looked to as an expert with lived experience. I was consulted. When I left, suddenly no one came to me seeking my opinion. It took me awhile to get over that. That made me realize how much of my identity had been tied to my job, **to what I did**. Some of you may have experienced the same thing when you retired from your job.

Who am I? A second answer is, **you are what you have**. As a Caucasian, university-educated man with a Canadian passport, I have a great deal of power. I'm also married and have three great children. I have a job, I'm mostly healthy, a home to live in, a bank account, and some money put away for retirement. I have a lot of things. But what would happen if I lost some of those things—my health would go, would lose my home? When this happens, people can slip into inner darkness.

Who am I? A third answer is, **you are what others say about you**. This is very powerful. When people speak well of us, we feel good. But if someone talks behind your back or says negative things about you, you feel sad. These days many people post personal stories, photos, or opinions on social media hoping others will respond with positive comments, making them feel good about themselves. But when people respond with negative comments, people feel anxious, hurt, and even become depressed. There's a growing body of research linking issues of mental health and usage of social media.

This is serious. I apologize ahead of time if this is insensitive, but I can't resist making

a comment here about the huge number of likes I receive for posting FMC's worship videos each week! Just look at how many there are! This should make me feel very good about myself and everyone who puts these worship videos together each week!



Who am I? The answers go on and on.



Now to the pressing question of who am I in this divine/human relationship? Jesus is declared to be a beloved child of God. As followers of Jesus, we are all given the weighty name, **Christian**. This is who we are.

The way for a Christian to find out who he or she is, is not to jump into the driver's seat of a Honda and head west, but rather look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus. This involves both **reflection and action**. Deepening our relationship

with God requires both reflection and action of Jesus' life, teachings, actions, and his death and resurrection over 2000 years ago. **Reflection** includes study, discussions, and practicing different forms of prayer. **Action** includes applying what we've learnt from our reflection to specific situations we encounter in our life. Since love of neighbour is one way of applying what we know of Jesus to our daily life, each one of us has to figure out who actually is my neighbour in 2021, and then specific actions demonstrating the love of Jesus. Reflection and action are needed to deepen our relationship.

We've all been given a name. My name, Rodney, comes from an old English surname which carries the meaning of "famous lord". Perhaps, my parents quietly hoped that someday I would live into that name until it became part of who I am. Maybe, they quietly hoped that someday I would be famous! Based on the number of likes in the FMC worship videos, they will have to wait a bit longer!

We have also been given this weighty name, **Christian**. The hope is that, given time you and me will all grow up so that that name will fit, that it will become who we are, until later someone will be able to look at your life and say, "yes Christian, that's the name that fits."

As Mennonites, we've internalized much of the demands of this relationship. We need to serve God, serve others, be devoted to the Church, be a good neighbour. We need to be active in the community, tell others about God, spend time in prayer, come to church and have encounters with God's Spirit.

I'm not sure if you noticed, but all of these statements focussed on the "me" part of the relationship. A danger for us Mennonites is that so much of our faith is focused on what "we" do, what "we are called" to be, and our "fulfilling the call of Jesus."

While we have a role to play, we must never forget that it's not just about us. I think one of the unpleasant things about growing up is to realize how much you is a part of a gift given by other people. You know we like to think that who I am is who I chose to be. I am who I am because I'm more intelligent than my parents, more sensitive, more socially aware. And as you grow up it's just surprising, in how many ways you resemble your parents or grandparents. So much of who you are has been laid on you. A gift.

Also, so much of what passes for the Christian faith is about us and how we feel. I don't know about you, but me—I don't always feel like a Christian. I get paid to do it, but I don't always feel that way. And I don't always have my head straight about everything I know I believe. And God knows I don't always act like a Christian.

But the good news is that fortunately, my relationship with God is not dependent on my thinking or feeling or even acting. Who I am is rooted in God, not in what I do, what I have, or what others say about me. It depends on what God has done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are all beloved children of God.

God is the change agent, the catalyst, the beginning of all good things. Though we are called to love our neighbour, we trust God will produce something good. Though we are called to spend time with our worshipping community, we trust God will transform lives through the encounter. We don't make it happen; we must be open to being transformed. Though we share the Good News with others, we trust God is working behind the scenes, working in peoples' hearts and minds to bring about change.

As we wade into the “deep” this Lenten season, let us remember who we are and who God is. It's not our job to make history turn out right. Our role in the relationship is to get in sync with what God is doing in the world. We do this by deepening our relationship with God. It's not about us, friends, but about the work of God in the world. Amen.