

1 Lent B
Hope for Those Who Missed the Boat

February 18, 2024
1 Peter 3:18-22

All humankind, except eight, missed the boat when God sent the great flood on earth. These people are described in Genesis 6:

⁵The LORD saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶And the LORD was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.¹

These people must have been really, really evil. God regrets having created them. It's hard to image how bad the people must have been for God to make such a difficult decision to destroy all that was created – that is, except for Noah and his family.

Our reading from 1 Peter says that the risen Jesus “went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.”²

Who are these spirits? They are described as those who had disobeyed God while Noah was building the boat. They are the people who missed the boat. Jesus goes to them and proclaims to them.

What did Jesus proclaim? Later in 1 Peter we have this verse: “For this is the reason the **gospel** was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit.”³

Jesus goes to the dead with the gospel. Jesus goes to them with the opportunity to live in the spirit forever with God.

There is hope for those who missed the boat. There is hope for those people who were so wicked and evil that God thought it best to destroy them. The crucified and risen Christ goes to them and preaches the gospel to them. There is hope for those who missed the boat.

I think that there are parallels with this text and our Gospel lesson. Right after Jesus is filled with the Spirit at his baptism; the Spirit, literally, throws him into the wilderness. He is forced into the realm of Satan and temptations and evil and wild beasts. It doesn't say that Jesus wanted to go there. He didn't have a choice. That's where the Spirit put him. He is tested. He is confronted with evil. He does not waver. Jesus battles Satan in Satan's arena and Jesus wins. After this, Jesus begins his public ministry. He passed the test.

In 1 Peter, Jesus goes to the realm of the dead and defeats death with the resurrection. He goes to the realm of the dead and defeats evil with his forgiveness and grace and goodness.

This verse is the source of the phrase in the Apostles' Creed: “He descended to the dead.” “The dead,” I believe, is a more accurate translation than “hell.” Hebrew, Greek, and Latin all use a word to refer to “the place of the dead.” It was not a place of punishment. It was just the place where all the dead people went.

There are debates as to whether Jesus' descent to the dead in the creed is connect with the line before it: “[he] was crucified, died, and was buried.” That is, the descent to the dead completes his death. It indicates that he really died rather than fell into a coma for a while then

¹ Genesis 6:5-6

² 1 Peter 1:19

³ 1 Peter 4:6

woke up.

Others argue that descent to the dead is the beginning of his return to life. He died and was buried; but he's no longer in the tomb. He is living and active in the realm of the dead. He is there to preach the gospel to the dead. He goes there to defeat the evil that there. He does this before he returned to earth as the resurrected Christ. Then, after 40 days, he ascended back to heaven where he rules over all powers. His return to life from death began with preaching the gospel to the dead.

He gives hope to all who have died, including the very worst of humanity – those who were living at the time of Noah – those who so evil and angered God so that God saw fit to destroy them and the rest of the world along with them. No one is so evil that they cannot be redeemed by Jesus Christ.

Satan couldn't stop him in the wilderness. The power of death couldn't stop him even in the realm of the dead. Jesus is more powerful than death.

The great flood was both a source of destruction against evil, and a source of salvation for those in the ark. Baptism is both a judgment against our sinful nature – it is to be drowned every day in the waters of baptism through repentance – and the source of our salvation, we have been washed clean and raised to a new life.

I had a man tell me that he thought of his baptism every time he took a shower. It was the washing away of the dirt in his life. He knew he'd get dirty again, and need more showers, but he was assured that in Jesus, all the evil he had done, and would ever do, is washed away in the waters of his baptism, removed by the forgiveness of God's grace.

1 Peter was written to give hope and encouragement to suffering Christians. They are being persecuted. They are living in a time of evil against the believers. There were living with great temptations to also become evil. There are these words in the verses just before our text:

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, ⁴ those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ⁵

It is unlikely that no one on earth today is as evil as those people at the time of Noah. It is unlikely that no one on earth can be as forceful with temptation as Satan was against Jesus in the wilderness. It is unlikely that any of us will face the persecution that the folks in 1 Peter faced. Regardless of our situations, Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness. Jesus defeated death with the resurrection. He offered the most evil people in the realm of the dead the gospel that leads to forgiveness and new life.

This means that there is certainly hope and new life for us no matter how much we have sinned and turned against God.

Satan has been defeated. The power of sin has been defeated. The power of death has been defeated. Jesus has won! That's the good news. Even in the midst of our difficulties, we have the assurance that all things are subject to Christ – even sin and death.

⁴ **1 Peter 3:16:** Other ancient authorities read *when they malign you as evildoers*

⁵ 1 Peter 4:15b-17

We have the promise that Jesus is stronger than the most violent people on earth. They are able to kill us; as the persecutors did to the early Christians. Jesus is stronger than death. The dead in Christ will rise to new life. Those baptized in Christ, just as Noah and his family survived the destruction of the flood, are assured of their future salvation once evil is destroyed.

It is good news for each of us who sometimes miss the boat. We fail to obey God as we should. We fail our tests to remain faithful, especially when we fear persecution from others. We live with hope of salvation and eternal life. We also need to be ready to tell anyone who asks about this hope we have – hope that we have even in the midst of evil and death. There is hope for those who miss the boat. Jesus is their hope. Jesus is our hope.