

# **Rainbows and Angels**

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church February 18, 2024 – Mark 1:0-15 & Gen 9:8-17)

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is the 40 days leading up to Easter where we reflect on Jesus's journey from his baptism to the cross. We often think of Lent as a time of testing and giving up something. The colour we use is purple which is a sign of penitence or of being sorry. Often people give up something to 'test' themselves like Jesus was tested in the desert. How many of you have given up sugar or chocolate or coffee in Lent?

Being tested is part of the story and Lenten experience of Jesus and we see that in our bible stories today. We see Noah having a similar experience. However, I want to argue that there is more to each of these stories.

Now Noah had been surely tested. Told there would be a flood and he needed to save two of every known animal, made him the laughingstock of the community, daring to build a boat when there was no sign of rain and then taking his family and all the animals on it for 40 days plus. Ridiculed by his neighbours, then proven to have got it right. he is stuck on a boat with just his family and many, many animals for 40 days until the flood waters receded. No doubt they all had cabin fever! However then there came relief and what does he do – get's rotten drunk and involves himself in some pretty inappropriate behaviour. Then in the sky appears a rainbow, a sign of God's promise to the entire world.

Jesus too finds himself surrounded by water, as he was baptised by his cousin John. Before he knows it, God's Spirit sends him out into the wilderness to be tested for 40 days (hear the echo of Noah's story). Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus was tested, but we know from Matthew and Luke that the tests involve food, safety and power. Again, that is not all of the story. There had been words of blessing from God at his baptism – my son, the one who I love and who pleases me. Then he spends 40 days in the wilderness with wild animals (again an echo of Noah who saved all the animals) and he is not harmed, they coexist in harmony. All the time, so we are told, Jesus is attended by angels, Jesus is cared for by God's messengers. At the end of his time Jesus knows his task is to proclaim the good news, to tell everyone that the Kingdom of God, the reign of God is near.

I wonder what thoughts and questions went through his mind. Did he think about what was important to him – forgiveness, reconciliation, care, compassion, giving? Did he consider things that he couldn't bear – lies, corruption, wielding power without concern for those you wield it over? Did he think about how he was going to go about his ministry and how he would counter the likely opposition from the powerful? Whatever went on for him out there, I think there is a sense that God was with him. God's Spirit had driven him out into the wilderness, and I suspect stayed there with him and went with him throughout his entire ministry.

We know that the people of God have always been tested at times. Think about Abraham called to sacrifice his son Issac, the story of Job, tested beyond belief, the

Israelites, tested as they wandered the desert for 40 years – but God’s faithfulness is also on display in all of these situations.

We too are tested, some more than others, but hear that God is faithful, and with you in the midst of such testing, that is what the Scriptures tell us.

The other thing that seems to me to be clear in our bible readings today is that whilst there is testing there is also blessing. For Noah it is the rainbow which is the sign that God will never destroy the entire creation. For Jesus it is the way he is kept safe in the wilderness, watched over by angels, by God’s messengers, enfolded by God’s care.

So, as we begin our Lenten journey this year what do our readings have to say to us.

First, there will always be times of testing, God’s people have always been tested and our worldview is countercultural and will always be ridiculed by the powerful.

Secondly, during those times God remains close, is present with us through it all.

Thirdly, we, like Jesus have a job to do. We share in the task of sharing the good news for all, of reminding others that God’s desire is blessing rather than condemnation.

Fourthly, that good news is for all, indeed it is for every living thing, for the entire world, for all of creation. Perhaps our role is to help make that a reality for all.

Finally, there is hope, there is always hope.

This Lent, instead of testing yourselves by giving up a pleasure perhaps you could immerse yourself in God’s word and experience the closeness of God. I invite you to take the sheet of 40 prompts (one for every day except Sundays) and ponder a bible verse each day. Just read it at the beginning of each day and let it guide your day.

May you this Lent continue to deepen your relationship with God.

May this Lent be a time in which you are reminded of God’s blessing and that God desires life in all its fullness for all, that is what the rainbow is a symbol of. Amen.