

Life gives us plenty of reasons to denigrate the world, to deny its goodness and set ourselves in opposition to it. Some passages of scripture, at first blush, lend themselves to this interpretation, and many a sermon has been preached contrasting the sinful world with the sacred church. But when Scripture denounces the evil of “the world,” the author is using the phrase as a term of art. To take the phrase literally would make the authors contradict God, who called the world good, and who continues to make the world better, despite what people think, say, and do.

Pointing out ways the world could be better can be both sacred and productive, but disparaging the world as a whole means we forgot that God created the world before God created the church, and more to the point, God created the world to be not just good but holy, an expression of God’s specific love for humanity. Furthermore, God created the world for human nourishment and celebration, that we might celebrate by offering back to God the gifts of the world with praise and more love. Thus, the origin of sin is not the shortcomings of the world, but the deeper horror of human indifference to, and disregard for, God.

In his eloquent, landmark book *For the Life of the World*, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann writes, “Man ate the forbidden fruit. The fruit of that one tree, whatever else it may signify, was unlike every other fruit in the Garden: it was not offered as a gift to man. Not given, not blessed by God, it was food whose eating was condemned to be communion with itself alone, and not with God. It is the image of the world loved for itself, and eating it is the image of life understood as an end in itself.”

Not to spoil the ending of our sacred story, but thanks be to God that God does not abandon us and leave the story to end there. God reveals God’s love for the world by the extraordinary measures God takes to recapture our attention and renew our relationship.

Atheists take sophomoric delight in pointing out the scientific implausibility of biblical stories, especially the foundational stories of Genesis. A few even get so far as to judge the morality of God or faithful characters according to their own notions of right and wrong. In so doing, they only prove their own ignorance of what Scripture is and how it works.

Scripture intends to capture our imaginations and prompt our deepest thoughts about who God is and what our relationship to God, and to one another, should be. Scripture is beguiling; it shifts between genres of literature, using whichever is best suited to telling the story it wants to tell. When the genre is documentary history, it is remarkably precise and accurate, as other ancient writings and modern archaeology have attested.

But today’s reading from Genesis is not documentary history. The author is making a critical theological point, as the repetition of the language suggests. Remember that this was before bold, italic, and underline formatting could be used to add emphasis. The more important something was, the more times the ancients would

say it.

So what are our ancestors trying so desperately to tell us? While the militant atheist reader is scoffing at the implausibility of a global flood or criticizing God for taking terrestrial life, the faithful reader immediately recognizes that the Earth covered by water is an image symbolizing creation and, in this context, renewal. For the primordial state of the created universe was the dark waters over which the spirit of God was pleased to move. So we see that rather than destroying the world, God is re-creating the world, sparing a faithful remnant and giving us, the descendants of that remnant, an even better world than God gave to Adam and Eve. We know this because the first thing God does in this new creation is give a gift, a sign that God's grace will be the defining quality of God's relationship with us.

As profound as this truth is, this moment is nowhere near the end of the story. Humanity would prove to need that grace desperately, time and again. And God is with us, making good on God's promise to meet humanity's sins with grace and the opportunity for renewal.

Of course we see God's grace offered to humanity most clearly and completely in the person of Jesus Christ, but we understand his mission more fully when we read the Gospels carefully, attuned to the stories the Evangelists are telling us and the techniques they use to tell them. To that end, look at the chain of events in today's Gospel, which Mark tells with brevity, but clarity. Jesus emerges from water then spends forty days in the desert. So keeping in mind that this is a story written by, for, and about people who lived and breathed the Hebrew Bible, we can consider the symbolism and parallels Mark used and start to see more in the story.

Jesus emerges from water, marking a new beginning in his own life and in the life of the world. He comes to reveal and to offer God's grace to the world in an even more powerful way. Jesus's forty days in the wilderness after emerging from the water likewise ties him to the exodus through the Red Sea and forty years Israel spent wandering in the desert, making a covenant with God and earning their identity as a holy nation, God's light to the world. Jesus too emerges from the wilderness offering a new covenant, a new way of being in a sacred relationship with God, and again this relationship is full of divine grace, "the good news of God," who is mighty to save.

The power of this sacred story, this gift from God, is such that anyone who has read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested it, is transformed by the grace of the one who caused it to be. As such, we can never be completely indifferent to the God who gives and renews our life. Yet we are always in need of God's grace, for our concern is always scattered to some extent to those things that God did not intend for us, things that give no life, things that we might summarily call "the world." God's grace is most visible to us in redeeming us from our flaws and shortcomings, just as it was most visible to the world when God was redeeming the world lifted high upon the cross in profound love.

That is the God we follow, so take care this Lent to renew your focus. Renew your faith in the Gospel message, the Good News of what God has done, is doing, and will do for us. Renew your identity as one who is baptized into new life in Christ by sharing that message. And return Christ to his rightful place as the highest and most central concern of your life. Share in his new life, and share that life with God's beloved world, which aches to hear good news.