

“Lent: A Paradoxical Journey.”

As I’ve been led to understand it, in the study of logic, a paradox can be defined as a statement that contradicts itself. For example, the statement “I always lie” is a paradox because even it is a true statement then it must also be a false statement.

But there is also a type of paradox known as the “irresistible force paradox.” An example of this can be found in a question I’ve heard posed many times: that is, “Can God create a rock so heavy that even he cannot lift it?” And this is a paradox because if the answer is “Yes” then God really isn’t omnipotent, and if the answer is “No” then why bother worshiping him at all?

But a better example of the irresistible force paradox comes from this statement: “What happens when an unstoppable force encounters an immovable object?” And I’m interested in this type of paradox because, in our reading from Genesis, we get to witness within God both an “unstoppable force” and an “immovable object.” But how did God get to be in such a quandary? Let’s explore that for a moment.

Well, as you know, “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), and everything God created he declared to be either “good” or “very good.” And for a while, things seemed to be going along rather swimmingly. But you know the story of Adam and Eve, and the serpent and the apple: that was essentially when humanity decided to “go renegade,” and after that things went south pretty fast. Quoting from *The Message* translation of the Bible, Genesis 6 describes what went through God’s mind:

God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil— evil, evil, evil from morning to night. God was sorry that he had made the human race in the first place; it broke his heart. God said, “I’ll get rid of my ruined creation, make a clean sweep: people, animals, snakes and bugs, birds— the works. I’m sorry I made them” (v. 5-7).

Now, and according to the legends, it was at this point that God caused the long rain, and even longer flood, that destroyed every living creature on the Earth—that is, except for those who escaped on the Ark. And it was while all this was taking place that God experienced within himself, an irresistible force paradox: that is, God’s unstoppable desire to create a peaceful world collided with God’s immovable compassion for his creation, even those who disobeyed him.

And so, while the passengers on the Ark were having the ride of their life, God was wrestling within himself, and trying to resolve this paradox. In the end, and fortunately for us, God decided that the “Let’s start the whole thing over from scratch” plan really wasn’t such a good idea, and God decided to turn over a new leaf. And so, as soon as the Ark is back on solid ground, God enters into a covenant with all the living things of earth, and these are the terms of that new covenant:

[God said,] “I’m setting up my covenant with you that never again will everything living be destroyed by flood-waters; no, never again will a flood destroy the Earth”
(Genesis 9:11; *The Message*).

And all of a sudden, and without any forewarning, the relationship between God and his creation was heading down a completely different path.

Now, we’ve all heard the story of Noah and the Ark— and probably for all of our lives— but it wasn’t until just recently that I was became aware of a certain surprising element to that new covenant. Maybe you can guess what it is.

Is it surprising that God lost hope over humanity, and that God decided to eradicate it from the face of the earth? No, not really, because that is an image of God that’s fairly consistent with the beliefs of the culture that gave us the story of Noah and the Ark. And this is an image of God that is still embraced by many people today, as evidenced by the bumper sticker that reads “Turn or Burn,” and by the billboard I’ve seen a couple of places in Kansas that says “Accept Jesus Christ now, or regret it forever.” So, no surprise here.

Or, is it surprising that God decides to save a remnant from the flood? Again, not really, because while scripture is filled with examples of God handing out some pretty harsh justice, it’s also filled with examples of how God is gracious, and merciful, and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. So, there’s no surprise here, either.

But what is surprising in this story, is the covenant that God makes with all of creation: God promises never again to destroy the inhabitants of the world. Now, on the surface, this looks like just another example of God's gracious mercy, but it's really more than that. Because, for God to forfeit— and to forfeit *for all time*— the right to destroy, is almost inconceivable. Never before had anyone heard of a god surrendering this sort of right or power.

But in this new covenant with creation, that's exactly what God does: he limits himself. He sets aside something that has always been his prerogative: that is, the right to destroy. And in doing so, God binds himself to his creation, he becomes personally invested in the fate of humanity, and perhaps for the first time, God becomes vulnerable, maybe even exposed. And all this, simply for the sake of a relationship with his people.

Now, as astonishing as all this may sound, it actually makes sense, because that's how things work in authentic relationships. Take parents, for example: they bind themselves in love to their children; they make all sorts of sacrifices for their children; they put limits on the places they can go and the things they can do, and all for the sake of their children. Parents will end up doing things that they never imagined they would do, or even imagined they could do, before they had children.

So, what does all this have to do with Lent? In our first reading, we hear how God willingly sacrifices his freedoms and prerogatives, and all for the sake of his relationship with us. That very same willingness reaches its climax during Holy Week, and on the Cross. Well, one of the purposes of Lent is to prepare us for Holy Week and Easter. And in this sense, Lent is a journey that takes us to a side of God's nature and personality that is, for most of us, unfamiliar ground. When people usually think about God, we often toss about terms like omnipotence and omniscience. But during Lent, we're invited instead to consider, and meditate upon, the weakness and vulnerability of God— which he willingly embraces for us. Lent reminds us that God's love for his creation is so great that he would even die for us.

And so, when I hear this story about God's covenant with Noah and all of creation, when I hear how God was willing to give up something that was his prerogative, and all for the sake of a relationship, I have to wonder: What am I willing to give up for the sake of those relationships I have with the people around me? And I think this is the real challenge that the season of Lent lays before each of us: What can we do mend broken relationships? What are we willing to give up, in order to heal the wounds that we've received, and may still

be harboring? What can we do to put ourselves in that place where we see others the way that God sees them, and embrace them just as God embraces us?

The season of Lent lasts forty days. In some ways, it's not nearly enough time to do what we need to do. But it is enough time to at least start our journey. It's a journey that tries to lead us from our usual preoccupations with ourselves, and leads us to viewing others as people who deserve our respect and support, and if for no other reason than because God has himself called them worthwhile. It's a journey that begins today, and takes us through Holy Week and the Cross, and ends up somewhere on the other side of the Resurrection. I don't know what awaits us at the end of our journey, but I am convinced that it is a journey worth taking, and that today is a good day to start walking.

So what happens when an unstoppable force encounters an immovable object? Well, when it comes to God, that paradox is resolved by a love that is both self-sacrificing and self-limiting. But when it comes to each of us, well ... that's a story still waiting to be told, and a journey still waiting to be taken.

Amen.