

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 18, 2024 (1st Sunday in Lent, Year B)
Genesis 9:8-17
1Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

Years ago, I went with the youth of my parish to the Synod Youth Gathering in Western North Dakota. We all wore white T-shirts with big letters across the front, "L.O.S.E.R., spelling the word LOSER." Let me tell you, those shirts got us noticed. That was before they came up with the hand sign: LOSER! (Make an L with fingers on forehead.) Right below the L-O-S-E-R, in much smaller print was the acronym, "Lord Our Savior Eternally Reigns." It was based on Matthew 10:39: "Those who lose their life for my sake will gain it." It made people think.

Today, I want US to THINK about losing, because losing is, in a way, a LENTEN theme. What does it mean spiritually and morally when we don't make the grade, when we don't make the cut, when we miss that critical shot in the last second of the game? What does it mean to be on the LOSING side SPIRITUALLY?

Our first reading today TALKS about losing. It's the conclusion of the story of Noah and the great flood. Now, this may not SEEM like a story about losing. After all, it ends with a rainbow and a promise from God. But what if we look at the WHOLE story, and from GOD'S point of view?

When you read the CREATION story in the FIRST chapter of Genesis, you notice that, at the end of each day, God looks over the creation and says, "It is good." This phrase echoes over and over again like a refrain as the days of creation passed. When we get to the SIXTH day, God creates human beings. And what does God say then? "It is VERY good." The Bible presents humanity as the CROWING GLORY, the ULTIMATE ACHIEVEMENT of creation. Not the solar system or the galaxies, not even the forces that hold the atom together are called "very good." Only the creation of HUMANS.

But as we read on, things IMMEDIATELY begin to go bad. By the time we get to the story of Noah and the ark, God is TERRIBLY disappointed. God's heart is so broken, that God decides that there's NOTHING else he can do but wipe the slate clean and start over.

In the story of the great FLOOD, God was the great LOSER. God's beloved humanity, God's precious children, God's VERY BEST DAY of creation had gone WRONG. I think of the flood as God WEEPING, the TEARS of God DROWNING the earth.

The great Lutheran writer Walter Wangerin tells a story about his son, Matthew. Now Matthew was one of these young people who, as soon as he learned to read, fell in love with comic books. And being good, well-meaning parents, Matthew's parents LIMITED his comic book intake. He could only have so many comic books per year, so that he would read something of QUALITY BESIDES comic books. But one day Matthew's parents discovered – hidden away in young Matthew's room – stacks and stacks of contraband comics.

Worse, as they examined this stash, they learned that they were all from the public library, and they were not checked out; they were stolen. So Matthew's parents gave him a lecture about honesty and stealing. Then they made him gather up all those comics and, with shame, take them back to the library and confess what he had done. They hoped and prayed that this was the end of the story.

But a year later, they again discovered contraband comics in young Matthew's room. This time they learned the books had been pilfered during a family vacation, at a convenience store down the road from their cabin...NOW SEVERAL states away. It wasn't realistic for Matthew to RETURN them from where he had stolen them, so they gave him a lecture and made him put all his comic books into a fire, one after another. Again, the parents hoped and prayed that he had learned his lesson. But before too long, they found stolen comic books in Matthew's room again.

His parents were desperate to find some way to get their message across. How could they STOP the STEALING? They chose the method they had NEVER used before; they resorted to corporal punishment. Dad took Matthew to his study, giving him both the lecture and a serious spanking. Afterwards, the father said, "You sit here in my chair in this study and you THINK about what you have done, and what will happen if you DON'T overcome this." Then he went outside, closed the door of his study, leaned against the wall in the hallway, and he wept. He wept because of what his son had done. He wept because of what HE had done. He wept out of fear for what the future might hold for this child of his.

Years later, when Matthew was an adult, he returned home and his mother and he reminisced about his childhood. Somehow or another, the story of the comic books came up. Matthew had grown up to be normal; he wasn't PERFECT, but he wasn't a THIEF. In the course of their conversation, Matthew's mother ASKED him about this and he said, "Well, you know after that time when Dad spanked me, I never stole again." She asked, "Was that because he spanked you?" And Matthew said, "No, it was because after he left the room I HEARD him CRYING, and I could NEVER take anything again."

The story of the great flood is the story of GOD'S tears for the fallen and failing humanity. Anytime, every time, you or I fall into the failures and sins and misguided ways of life, God weeps. Whenever, we, in our OWN way, take what isn't ours, whenever we hurt others or ourselves, God's heart breaks. Of course, WE LOSE TOO, but, in a very important way, GOD loses. WE FAIL and GOD WEEPS.

There's a powerful image in the movie the Passion of the Christ. When the long ordeal of the beating, scourging, and crucifixion finally comes to an end, when Jesus dies on the cross, we see a single drop of rain fall from the sky, a teardrop of his father. We KNOW it's a teardrop of God, because when it hits the ground, it causes the EARTHQUAKE that shakes the temple in Jerusalem, and rips the curtain that SUPPOSEDLY SEPARATED God from humanity.

God will NOT BE separated from us. That's why Jesus came to the world in the first place, why he took on our flesh – so he could PROVE his love for us, so he could come to WHERE WE are. That's why Jesus ENDURED those trials; because that's where WE are, that's what WE endure. And that's why Jesus died a very HUMAN death, in a very GODLY way.

If it were only OUR story, there would BE ONLY losing, ONLY DYING. But it's not ONLY OUR story; we are part of GOD'S story, and LOSING is NOT the END of GOD'S story – JESUS is.

In the words of 1 Peter, "Christ suffered for sins ONCE FOR ALL, the righteous FOR the unrighteous, in order to BRING you to God." Jesus DIED to BRING us to God. And he went to hell, in OUR place, for OUR sins, so that WE could LIVE.

In all our failures, we may FEEL like LOSERS, but in Christ, God was willing to lose EVERYTHING, even his own beloved son, so that WE could WIN.

And then, the great surprise of EASTER is that Jesus CHANGES the ENDING of the story. He reverses it, overturns it, overcomes it. He DEFEATS death. He WINS the victory AFTER all.

Jesus MADE his father's FLOOD TEARS into a SIGN of HOPE. When each of us was baptized, he WASHED us in them. We were BATHED in GOD'S TEARS, to be SAVED from the STORM like Noah, and RAISED WITH Christ in the resurrection.

So look for that rainbow. It's God's REMINDER to you that, in the end, God makes EVERY believer, even ALL us LOSERS, into the REAL WINNERS.

(Make an L with fingers on forehead.) LOSER? No. "Lord Our Savior Eternally Reigns." Thanks be to God. Amen.