**1 Lent, Feb. 22, 2015, Gen 9:8-17; Ps 25; 1 Petr 3:18-22;Mark 1:9-15; The Rev. Mary Trainor**

There are great differences among us. Oh yes, we are all from the species *Homo sapiens* -- but we sure do differ in lots of different ways. We were born in different places, we differ in education and professions, we differ in religious backgrounds, in preferences, in politics, in height and hair color and skin tone and body type. We differ in recreational inclinations, we differ in the food we like to eat and what we like to watch on TV. We live in a culture that likes to enhance these differences. Our culture would have us separate into "us" and "them" based upon these differences.

Many years ago, in a remote trading post on a dirt road on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, I purchased this small rug. This little blue handmade rug has threads that are of different texture, thickness and colors. Lots of variation, kind of like us. But the weaver intertwined these diverse threads together into something new, useful, unified, and beautiful. This rug symbolizes unity, in spite of differences. Our church is about unity, unity in Christ. This is the one place in our lives where we can transcend differences, and celebrate our unity. The great weaver who intertwines us into something new, useful, unified, and beautiful is Jesus the Christ. Our church has us join together, not be separate; together we pray, together we praise, together we receive the real presence of Christ, together we cook and clean and serve. We are "us," no matter if you have been coming here for years or just stepped into this door for the first time today. There are no outsiders here, there is no "them:" only us, unified under the cross of Christ.

In our Gospel lesson today, we witness the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth: His baptism, His being tempted in the wilderness, and the first of His teachings. Jesus said, "***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*** He is saying that He is here, He is the embodied kingdom of God--present on earth for us! He is saying that we need to turn away from our old ways, and turn towards Him, believe in Him. He is the Good News! And, unlike our culture that is so full of broken promises, God means it - He is good to His word. In our Genesis reading this morning, we heard about God establishing the covenant (promise) that never again shall a flood destroy the earth -- and that the rainbows in the sky are our reminders that God is good to His word. Every time we see a rainbow, we are to be reminded of God's faithfulness. Jesus made many promises to us too, which we learn about when we read the bible -- Jesus' promises included: (1) eternal life, (2)forgiveness of sins,(3)victory over death,(4)He is with us, and will never forsake us, (5) His grace is sufficient.

While in California, I had the opportunity to get to know my five year old grandnephew Owen. About seven years ago, Jim and I officiated over Owen's parents wedding. I was showing Owen around in the chapel at the retreat center, and he sat down in a pew, pulled me next to him, plopped a Book of Common Prayer on his lap, and asked me to read to him from the Bible. Wow. Cool. I read a Psalm to him and talked with him about how Jesus is right here with him, and wants to talk with him. He asked me, "**how is it that Jesus is right here, and in heaven at the same time?**" Good question! I answered this way, "**we don't really understand how this is possible, but we know it is -- Jesus is right here for you**." I told him about how much Jesus loves little children, and especially loves it when little children talk with Him. He got the most amazed and satisfied look on his face. Owen understands God upholds His promises.

We are now in Lent, the 40 day period before Easter when we prepare ourselves for the crucifixion and resurrection. Lent is a time to turn more completely to Christ. Today, we begin this season with our annual meeting and remind ourselves that we are the Body of Christ. We have Lenten devotionals to help us with our Lenten disciplines. We have a few liturgical changes, to help us focus on Christ in a new way. We have stations of the cross and bible study each week, and we have two Lenten Quiet Retreats (March 15,22) - as well as four services during Holy Week, the first few days of April. I look forward to journeying through Lent with you. We know the rest of the story -- Christ is alive and keeps His promises. Amen.