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 Lent 3, Year C / 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9
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 Trinity Church in the City of Boston

"Our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized in the cloud and the sea."

Years ago at a seminary faculty meeting the subject came up of the sensitivity of college students to difficult topics that arise in the course of a liberal arts education, and the various strategies college professors use to introduce painful and even traumatic topics. My friend and New Testament colleague, the Rev Dr. Jane Patterson, turned to the group, shrugged and announced, we're used to this: "The Whole Bible needs a trigger warning!"

Today's scripture readings state baldly some harsh theologies. When the people sinned in the wilderness and worshipped idols, God "struck them down," "twenty three thousand in a single day." When they "complained" they were "destroyed by serpents." And Jesus, in a moment when he wasn't feeling meek and mild, after he was asked to comment on some horrific tabloid headlines, he charges his listeners,

"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Sin, divine punishment, and repentance are "old school" notions, that we might associate with earlier less enlightened eras, or with fire and brimstone Christians, who can find ready candidates for sinners in scripture with their political opponents in the present day.

Trigger warning having been given, let us revive scriptural, spiritual memory and venture into the imaginative world, stretch our hearts to retrieve some ancient words to see what life these terrifying tales have to offer us here in Lent, in the year 2025, when our own headlines make the dangers in the Great Litany sound comparatively mild.

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory,
 and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice; and from all want
 of charity, Good Lord deliver us.¹

How did our scripture come to be? After the first Easter earliest followers of Christ remembered the words and deeds of their teacher, and they told the story of his passion and death again and again as they baptized new converts and as they shared the holy meal. They returned to holy

¹ Book of Common Prayer, p. 149.

scripture, the psalms, the prophets, they combed through the pictures and details. Their reading nourished and replenished their memory, and their memory of Jesus shaped their reading.²

The retelling of their story formed them as a community shaped with a particular orientation to the world and a pattern of behavior, faithful, loving their God and loving their neighbor.

In our epistle, Paul draws on this Christian memory. In his miniature compact sermon Paul plays the notes of well-known tunes, alludes to vivid incidents to evoke pathos, emotions of fear and horror, reminding, reassuring, exhorting, the congregation in Corinth to change their behavior and realign with the covenant with God and to renew their faithfulness and to consider the wellbeing of their companions at the supper table more than their own knowledge and spiritual gifts. New Testament scholars name these verses "a midrashic homily"³

Get ready for your categories to be scrambled: Put logic aside, forget your expectations of linear time, and your preference for unmixed metaphors:

It begins like this:

"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ."

The first principle for divine reading: look for what attracts you, what stings, burns, sings, bemuses. Look for what you might love.

Listen to its rhythm, five repetitions of "all," "all," "all," "all," "all," making it harder and harder to divide and fracture our community.

Hear the invocation of our ancestors, the mothers and fathers, who practiced faith in the living God in such a different time and culture, making it hard to believe that we exist without a history.

Notice its setting by the side of the salty sea with thunderheads piled high, promising a storm. You don't have to picture the "real" Red Sea, substitute here your own ocean - mine is the deep cold Atlantic.

² See the work of Ellen B. Aitken, *The Morphology of the Passion Narrative*, 1997.

³ Ellen B. Aitken, "τὰ δρώμενα καὶ τὰ λεγόμενα: The Eucharistic Memory of Jesus' Words in First Corinthians," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 1997.

Imagine how the vapor from the ocean is becoming a cloud and how in their terrified flight the parents and children, peered through the damp drops and brushed the moisture from their skin.

I always love water in Scripture - I remember Anne Lamott's observation:

Christianity is about water... It's about baptism, for God's sake. It's about full immersion, about falling into something elemental and wet. Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that's a little sloppy because at the same time it's also holy, and absurd. It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.⁴

I love the anachronism - baptism "into Moses." And the crazy cock-eyed metaphor of the traveling rock from which heavenly water flowed.

Here Paul is activating the holiest, most cherished memory of the people of God, their salvation story -- when God split open the sea and let them pass through, and made the waters stand up like walls. He led them with a cloud by day, * and all the night through with a glow of fire.⁵

When Moses climbed the mountain the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it for six days.

The wilderness years were pungent. God was never far from them, setting a table in the wilderness, raining down manna from heaven to fill their hunger and to sate their thirst, bringing streams out of a cliff and the waters rushed out like rivers (Psalm 78).

Paul's reminds them of shame. Murmuring, complaining, putting God to the test, and of their fore parents' most appalling sin --- they melted their metals and molded, and encircled, and bent their knee to a glistening golden calf: "they sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play."⁶ And they died.

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, Riverhead Books, 2008.

⁵ Book of Common Prayer, Psalm 78.

⁶ Ellen Aitken, HTR, 1997.

These examples were written (they became scripture), Paul says, to instruct us. I believe that Paul's midrashic homily, humorous, lovely, repellent, shocking, threatening, comforting, was written to instruct *us*.

Sin. A repeated pattern of disobedience, selfishness, craving the wrong food. Sin is a powerful descriptive, diagnostic tool to interpret what is happening today... the headlines ... deadly division, no truth, tribalism, violent simplification. Are we shocked that once in a while extraordinary individuals act with evil intent? Or does sin, human sin, multiply and spread, hunger for power cannot be satisfied, one violent word on top of another, one hostile action upon another. When our scriptural memory is rekindled, we remember this.

Building a god of our own - golden and glistening - our own identity, our own centrality, our own righteousness, and dancing around it, eating and drinking and rising up to play, abusing each other is still our cardinal, chronic, original sin.

A second principle of divine reading: before you identify the sinners as your favorite enemies, receive scripture in a posture of self-reflection and repentance. Feel where it causes you to flush scarlet.

Ask, "when has my Christian community, my parish, my seminary, been behaving badly , been hurting each other, gone out of whack, off the track? What is happening now?"

"Do I lust to be right, lust to be perfect, lust to be self-sufficient?"

Am I worn out, dancing all day and all night around the golden bull?

Sin causes misery and pain, and it's poisonous as serpents. You can read that misery as God's punishment or resist that reading with the wideness of God's mercy. Either way, sin causes misery.

Although fear of divine punishment may no longer motivate us today to turn around, to repent, to say I'm sorry, to make amends, to reorient ourselves to God and our neighbor, memory can encourage us and nourish us.

Connecting with our ancestors, so distant and so near. Divine reading. Remembering how the time of struggle and shame and testing was also the time when God's presence was closest, night and day.

Sharing spiritual food and spiritual drink, the inexpressible taste of the morning manna, the chill chalky water from the desert spring.

Baptism into Moses, a people born of the sea. Infants dressed in white baptized into Christ.

We tell the story of Jesus, crucified and risen. We fall into something elemental and wet. We share spiritual food of his body and share spiritual drink of his blood. We return to holy scripture to replenish our memory and revive our faith.

And together in our time of testing, we know the risen Christ, as sure as that rock rumbling behind us.

Amen.