

**Lent 1:** February 18, 2018

**Scripture:** Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

### **Pressing the reset button: Floods, covenants and baptisms**

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*Lent has begun and we are beginning a series on covenants: "The word "covenant," infrequently heard in conversation, is quite commonly used in legal, social (marriage), and religious and theological contexts.*

*The term "covenant" is of Latin origin (con venire), meaning a coming together. It presupposes two or more parties who come together to make a contract, agreeing on promises, stipulations, privileges, and responsibilities. In religious and theological circles there has not been agreement on precisely what is to be understood by the biblical term. It is used variously in biblical contexts. In political situations, it can be translated treaty; in a social setting, it means a lifelong friendship agreement; or it can refer to a marriage.<sup>1</sup>*

My favourite part is that in religious circles we haven't agreed on exactly what it means. We are talking about a covenant that God makes that is apparently one-sided. So with Noah we start with the one covenant that breaks the rule.

(I'm assuming we all know the basics of the story of Noah and the Arc. As always, I urge you to go to your Bibles and re-read the portions of the story surrounding what we read today – it is not how you remember it from Sunday School.)

Today we have two stories about water – the Flood and Jesus' baptism – and three characters (not including us) who need to remember who they are and what they're doing here.

Let's start with God.

If you remember the second day of creation, God said: *'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'* So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/covenant/>

*And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together were called Seas. And God saw that it was good.*

Yada, yada, yada... chapter 6: 11,17

*The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with violence, and when God saw how corrupted the earth was, how all flesh was acting in a corrupt way upon the earth, God said to Noah: "The end of all flesh has come to mind, because the earth is filled with violence on their account. ...I am going to bring the flood waters upon the earth to destroy all that lives under the heavens, all that has the breath of life in it."*

In the words of Wes Howard-Brook "It should give us great pause to hear Genesis announce that the Creator who blessed all creation and pronounced it "good," declaring humanity "very good," now has decided that the final stage of creation was a mistake. It is a dramatically sweeping judgment on "civilization" and the violence that sustains it."<sup>2</sup>

With a week such as we've had, witnessing the rising tides of systemic racism against indigenous peoples, the mad idolatry of guns and individual rights, the scapegoating of people with mental illness, it's not hard for me to understand God's urge to just let it all revert back to chaos, to press the great Alt+Ctrl+Del button of the universe and start over (or Ctrl+Cmd+Eject if the Universe is a Mac). To press that reset button and start all over.

So according to this myth, that's what God does, just wipes out all the proverbial "bad guys" and essentially reverses back to the second day of creation in hopes of rooting out humanity's tendency towards violence.

But then, when the great resetting Tsunami is over and the chosen survivors are coming out of the Arc – minus the unicorns, apparently – God reassesses. God essentially concludes: "Yeah, no matter how bad it gets, I don't think we'll do that again." God recovers the creative drive and desire to imbue humanity and creation with the divine image. "The cycle of violence cannot end until all are dead or vengeance itself is rejected." (Wes Howard-Brook)

God makes a vow. God hangs up the weapon of destruction, the bow, and leaves it as a symbol of a promise, a covenant, never to obliterate living creatures again. (*Gesture of hanging up a bow*)

God says to Noah *'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the*

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<sup>2</sup> *Come Out My People!: God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond*, by Wes Howard-Brook, Orbis Books,

*ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'*

It's like God knows that it will be tempting to want to wipe the whole thing out again sometime. The covenant is the way for everyone involved to remember that God doesn't really want to resort to violence. A reminder to go back to creation rather than destruction, to the primordial "it is good." In the story of the Flood, the Divine parent – as is sooner or later the case for all parents – needs to hold together justice and mercy.

It is interesting that there are no conditions on God's promise, it is simply an reassurance based on God's character, that destruction is not God's goal.

**From God's character, we learn that it is good to set out reminders and agreements about our commitments not to resort to violence. We learn that God does not wish to destroy us – or anyone else. Be encouraged by God's promise to act with mercy.**

Before we go any further, I feel it is important to tell you that we are speaking the language of myth and story here this morning, not the language of science and fact. Myths help us to make sense of our world and our human experience and of our encounters with the Divine.

This particular story of a Flood, which we find in the book of Genesis, is a variation on other similar ones in the ancient Near East. It's a very very very old story. One might say it is Antediluvian<sup>3</sup>

Now, let's look to Noah.

Gen 6:9 says "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation: Noah walked with God."

Apparently the ancient Rabbi's who interpreted this story couldn't agree on why Noah caught God's attention and was volunteered for a building project and to be saved from drowning. Was he just not as bad as everyone else by comparison, or was he special in some way? Either way, Noah found favour with God because he walked with God (Gen 6.9). He was at the very least putting himself in contact with God – much as God had longed to be in contact with Adam in the creation story.

I was reminded of the hymn that was sung last week based on Micah 6:8

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?*

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<sup>3</sup> - of or belonging to the time before the biblical Flood (so outdated it came before the flood)

That walk with God is what got Noah to stand out from the rest of humanity that lived only through violence. When he got out of the Arc he thanked God for being spared and he accepted the new beginning that was offered. New beginnings, though they don't feel like it at the time, are always a gift. (Somebody pointed out how long it would have taken Noah to have that celebratory glass of wine after getting out of the Arc. He had to plant the vineyard, harvest the grapes, etc. Sometimes we don't realize the gift until some time has past.)

**Noah was the witness of God's covenant. From Noah we learn that walking with God is the way to break the cycle of violence and to maybe get a chance at a reset. Be encouraged in your walk of faith.**

Fast forward a few centuries, people continue to do violence against each other. The Bible tells us that God has made a few more covenants with other people along the way. Abraham, Moses, to name a couple. Trying and trying to change those patterns of destruction. Each covenant renewal comes with a difficult journey but each becomes more and more inclusive, a blessing to nations. Each covenant underscores God's desire to rescue, to recreate conditions where we can live out the best version of creation.

And then finally comes Jesus, the new covenant.

Jesus goes through the rite of baptism. A cleansing through water, a reset of the Spirit, and God gives him the "it is good" stamp of approval – God says, "I am well pleased." (I was remembering the Orthodox tradition where there is a ritual of sprinkling the whole congregation as a reminder of their baptism. We are not a liturgical church, but I'd like to sprinkle all of you right now to remind you about your baptism. It's not a magic formula, but remembering it is that reset of our choice to live life according to God's covenant against destruction.)

God being pleased with Jesus, does not spare him from entering a place of trial – with wild beasts and tender angels all present in the same place. We don't know what happened, but it was likely difficult and tempting to give up. But out of that trial Jesus comes back to say to his own violent world "Your time's up!" It's time for God's kingdom! For peace, for justice, for attention for the weak and marginalized, freedom for the captives of this violent system!) As his church, we seek to live in that new covenant.

**From Jesus we learn that there is always hope for setting the world aright. God has not given up on us. We can still be saved from the chaos and the violence. Be encouraged to live the values of God's kingdom and not the values of the violence that is in the world.**

Today is the beginning of the season of Lent. It begins with a mark on Ash Wednesday remind us of our own mortality. The words spoken when you get the cross of ashes are:

Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return. In a way, it the question of, If you were to die tomorrow, what would you change today?

Lent is an invitation to reset.

Like God did in this story, maybe you want to recommit to mercy.

Like Noah, maybe you want to focus more on your walk with God.

With Jesus, maybe you want to remember that we live by the values of the Kingdom of God.