

Year B

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 7 and verses 12 and 13 read:

“God is a righteous judge,
a God who displays his wrath every day.
If he does not relent,
he will sharpen his sword;
he will bend and string his bow.
He has prepared his deadly weapons;
he makes ready his flaming arrows.”

Aren't we glad that when it rains and the sun shines through the rain drops and a beautiful rainbow appears in the clouds that the rainbow is pointing away from the earth? That's not an accident. It's God's intention

that we all see that he is not shooting his arrows at us.

The great flood is recorded in Genesis chapters six to eight and it's a significant chunk of Scripture referring, in effect, to the traumatic act of re-creation. Before the original act of creation was complete the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep. We have almost a return to this state as all living things were eliminated barring what God permitted to come through from the primeval age. What a mess humanity had made of the privilege of stewardship! Violence and destruction that

is not confronted and dealt with builds and gathers momentum; the downward spiral draws all things into its whirlpool. Humanity had been given responsibility and with that responsibility came the capacity to put a stop to disobedience. But God's warnings were ignored and He was compelled to act. The situation was so bad that the creator felt the only course of action was to wipe the slate clean and start all over again. The violence of humankind was to be met with a divine violence the world had never experienced before.

CNN reported the following on 16th January this year:

“Searchers in California sifted through mud-caked debris on Monday for three people missing in mudslides that have killed at least 20 and walloped Montecito, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff’s Office said.

Hampered by blocked roads, downed trees and power lines, deputies searched for survivors. The mudslides came in the early morning hours of last Tuesday, destroying an estimated 65 homes and damaging hundreds of others, the California Department of Fire and Forestry Protection

said. The rain poured down on hillsides charred by recent wildfires, which burned vegetation that otherwise could make the terrain more resistant to mudslides.

The Thomas Fire -- the largest wildfire in California's recorded history -- burned more than 281,000 acres in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties from early December into this month. It wasn't fully contained until Friday. For days, rescuers searched frantically for the missing after mud and boulders barrelled into neighbourhoods in and near Montecito, an affluent seaside community east of Santa Barbara. The

mudslides demolished homes and left roads impassable.”¹

Some may have believed that this natural disaster, along with the countless others through history, was the judgement of God being poured out on disobedient humanity. But we know differently because when we look to the sky we see the bow pointing away from us to the heavens. You see, after the great flood described in Genesis, God covenanted, God promised to end violence because humankind could not.

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/15/us/southern-california-mudslides/index.html>

The story of the great flood in Genesis has its origins in other ancient flood accounts from other cultures. The flood myth originated in Mesopotamia where we know of three distinct versions; the Sumerian Epic of Ziasudra, and as episodes in two works in Akkadian (the language of Babylon), the Atrahasis Epic and the Epic of Gilgamesh. The oldest written text is the Ziasudra epic, dating from about 1600 BC, which is long before the written account in Genesis. This highlights to us that a belief in the destruction of the world through the action of supernatural forces was assumed by

significant ancient civilisations. However, the Genesis' account is unique in its interpretation of the divine action and its repercussions for the continuing creation. For the writer of Genesis and therefore for the Jewish and Christian faiths, God destroyed and then unilaterally promised that his violence would end now: unilaterally, in other words we, humanity, the cause of the mess, have promised nothing. So this is very different from the subsequent covenants made with Abraham and with the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus where there was a requirement

on both parties to keep their side of the bargain.

Booker T. Washington described meeting an ex-slave from Virginia in his book *Up From Slavery*. He wrote; "I found that this man had made a contract with his master, two or three years previous to the Emancipation Proclamation, to the effect that the slave was to be permitted to buy himself, by paying so much per year for his body; and while he was paying for himself, he was to be permitted to labor where and for whom he pleased.

Finding that he could secure better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he was still in debt to his master some three hundred dollars. Notwithstanding that the Emancipation Proclamation freed him from any obligation to his master, this black man walked the greater portion of the distance back to where his old master lived in Virginia, and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands.

In talking to me about this, the man told me that he knew that he did not have to pay his debt, but that he had given his word to his master, and his word, he had never broken.

He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom till he had fulfilled his promise."²

That's what a covenant demands, but tragically that's what humanity could never deliver when covenants became bi-lateral with Abraham and Israel.

We live in Lenten lands. This season of Lent brings into sharp focus more than any other, the tension of the 'in between' in which we live. God's desire for a balanced, unified cosmos at peace is in conflict with humanity's corrupting influence on all things. Lent recognises this conflict through

² <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/washington/washing.html>

the life of Jesus who was cast out into the desert by God's Spirit to be with the wild beasts. What a prospect! Where those wild beasts going to tear him apart or would God through divine action limit the activity of the meat eating creatures? And this tension between danger and promise went with Jesus all the way through his life to the ultimate crisis point on the Cross at Calvary. The promise to humanity after the great flood involved God making it very clear that he would embrace suffering, and we know subsequently that that would be to the point when his Son would shout in his face that he

had been abandoned! That's where we live now in one sense but not in another and it's certainly not where we are headed.

The following words are inscribed on the headstone at the grave of Joy Gresham, the wife of C.S. Lewis:

“Here the whole world (stars, water, air,

And field, and forest, as they were

Reflected in a single mind)

Like cast off clothes was left behind

In ashes, yet with hopes that she,

Re-born from holy poverty,

In lenten lands, hereafter may

Resume them on her Easter Day.”³

The post-flood lenten lands are not the end of the story, but it is important that we compel ourselves every year to confront their reality in order that we are prepared to welcome our Easter Day. The season of Lent will rigorously prepare us if we are willing to expose ourselves to it. It will benefit our souls. Amen.

³ <http://oxfordinklings.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/oxford-crematorium.html>