

February 21 2021 [St. Andrew's]

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

¹⁷ So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

Sermon: “Submerged”

In 2002, something horribly frightening happened to our world.
I don't think it got very much attention, though;
in the global political turmoil following 9/11,
this particular disaster was more of a whimper than a bang.

In February of that year, a chunk of ancient, polar ice shelf
a little bigger than Lambton County
and about 1.5 Canadian football fields' thick
broke away from Antarctica and floated into the sea.

This floating glacier and those that followed it in the years since,
from Antarctica and the Arctic,
melt when they hit warmer waters,
gradually raising the sea levels in the world's oceans.

Islands in the South Pacific are already disappearing;
70 or 80 years from now,
when today's preschoolers and primary school students are retired,
coastal cities like New York, Miami and New Orleans
will have lost whole neighbourhoods to the ocean.
An incremental flood
is taking place in our world.

If rising sea levels don't phase you,
perhaps the burning of California will,
or the terrible drought and devastating bush fires
that scorched so much of Australia.
Or our own Canadian fires out west,
or the increasingly frequent and violent hurricanes
in the east.

Or the Indonesian capital city of Jakarta,
home to over ten million people,
that is sinking into the sea at a steady rate of four inches per year.
That's not because of melting ice sheets,
it's because city water is only provided
to half of the residents;
everyone else has private wells,
and as the underground water resources
are wrung-out like a sponge,
the city sinks down,
unsupported.

Or if that's too far away, how about Texas this past week;
I expect we've all seen on the news
the consequences of near-unprecedented winter weather
and a deregulated power generation and distribution system.

Today's Scripture tells the story of another natural disaster: a great flood.
Not a slow but inevitable rise in sea water,
but a sudden downpour that covered
even the tops of the mountains.
This first natural disaster we encounter in the Bible
is a mere six chapters past creation.

Forty days and nights of rain and storm, and 150 days afloat.
Under all that water, such a depth of water
that mountain peaks became shoals beneath it,
the submerged landscape must have taken on an eerie look.

Back in the mid-twentieth century,
when all the big hydroelectric dams were being built
– think Hoover Dam –
lots of little towns and villages
were evacuated and permanently flooded;
have you ever seen pictures?

It's so strange and unnatural,
seeing houses and streets and walls and gardens,
totally submerged by water.

We tend to want to stay with Noah and his family
and the animals and the birds in the ark,
tossed and rolled by the waves,
hammered by wind and rain,
as frightening and unpleasant as that must have been.

But deep down underneath them,
below the waves and the wind,
was the far more unsettling sight of the world
Noah and his family had known,
drowned and surrounded by water.

In Genesis 6, God explains the reason for this great flood.
God's good creation had become thoroughly polluted by sin,
corroding all the wonder and beauty,
eroding the relationships among human beings,
with God,
and between humanity and the earth.

And so, God determined that a clean slate was the way to move forward.
God instructed Noah to build an ark,
load it up with his family,
a breeding pair of every bird and animal,
and enough supplies to sustain them.

And the rain came, and the floodwaters rose;
the ark floated but all else was submerged
beneath the rising water and the churning newly-made sea.

After 150 days, the waters receded,
and eventually Noah and his shipmates,
human, bird and animal,
descended from the ark.

Imagine for a moment what that landscape must have looked like.
Have you ever seen a town or farmland after a flood or a hurricane?
Trees bent and broken, buildings in rubble,
hills and riverbanks eroded,
grass flattened and matted,
grey-brown silt over everything.

I wonder if that's what greeted Noah and his family,
the animals and the birds,
and God,
after the water receded:
the aftermath of a global natural disaster.

But there is hope.
In this passage of Scripture, there is a promise,
the covenant,
that God makes with humanity
and with all the animals, plants, birds and bugs of creation:
not to harm creation, ever again.

Our Lent worship series is all about God's covenant promises
and the trust and hope we can find in those promises.
A covenant goes a bit further than a simple promise, though.
It's a binding agreement, certainly,
but one that exists within a relationship,
founded on promises
of faithfulness to one another.

Covenants between God and God's people are always uneven,
because God is both vastly more powerful and capable than we are,
but he's also a good deal more reliable and constant, too.

This particular covenant, made here by God in Genesis 9,
is not one of the more famous Old Testament covenants.
But it is the first covenant and the biggest in scope,
because God is making a promise to everything God's created;
not just one person, or a family or group of people.

This covenant promise is to all creation.
God regrets the destruction he's enacted;
God doesn't actually decide that it was unnecessary,
but he's sad that it had to happen.

So God makes a covenant promise of care
toward his made-new-again creation:
this kind of destruction will never happen again,
not by God's hand.

So does that mean that,
when it comes to creation and how we interact with it,
does that mean that it doesn't matter

what we do or don't do to look after it?
 Because God's not going to wipe us out again,
 so we should take what we want
 and not worry too much about it.

Let's go back a few verses in Genesis 9.

This covenant promise God makes is actually
 the middle of a conversation he's having with Noah.

We read verses 8-17; here are verses 1-2:
 "Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them,
 "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.
 The fear and dread of you will fall
 on all the beasts of the earth,
 and on all the birds in the sky,
 on every creature that moves
 along the ground,
 and on all the fish in the sea;
 they are given into your hands."

This giving over of creation into our hands,
 the re-boot of God's good creation...
 ...all together kind of point us back toward Genesis 1.

There, right at the beginning,
 God made humanity – Adam and Eve –
 in his own image so that they – and we –
 could rule over or have dominion over
 all the plants and the animals and the birds and the land.

Over the centuries, we've understood rule or dominion as
 "ours to make use of,"
 as creation comprised of resources for us to exploit,
 as places for us to conquer and dominate.

Here God repeats that "it's all yours" again,
 but this time, this time,
 God unpacks what he means by that.
 By making his own covenant promise
 not to hurt or harm creation,
 asking nothing from creation in return
 for that care...
 ...God is showing us by example what it means
 to have the care of all life

given into our hands.

By God's own example,
we see that it doesn't mean taking what we need without thought,
it doesn't mean exploiting or damaging creation
or harming it in any way...
...ruling over, having dominion,
all creation in our hands,
means taking care of it like God would,
as his image-bearers,
in grateful response
to this covenant God's made.

At the beginning of this message,
when I started out by talking very unsubtly
about global warming causing sea levels to rise,
about the mismanagement of natural resources
causing a city to sink,
about capitalism creating a situation
in which a blizzard is causing
property destruction and death
in a first-world country...
...did you tune me out?
Are you starting to tune me out again, right now?
Did you start getting angry or dismissive,

because you think that global warming is a bunch of nonsense?

Offended, because environmental issues don't belong in church
or have anything to with faith?
Or were you cheering along,
because you are an avid recycler and composter,
and deeply concerned about the climate?

Or worried and sad,
because you don't really think much about the environment,
but you do think about people,
and you saw those awful pictures of families
pitching tents in their living rooms to stay warm?

I'm not going to tell you that you have to think or act a certain way
about environmental issues to be Christian.
And that's because caring about environmental issues

is not part of our faith;
but caring for creation is.

Whichever “side” of the climate debate we’re on,
there is a powerful political dialogue
surrounding human beings and creation, these days.

Whichever side of the debate we’re on,
we’ve all allowed the politics of
wealth and ambition and power
to intrude into our covenant relationship with God,
polluting this promise of care
connecting God and humanity and creation.

We’ve all allowed forces other than our covenant relationship with God
to corrode our response to that promise to care for creation.
And if you eschew all involvement with any of this stuff, well,
caring for creation is caring for people,
because we are all part of creation,
and all part of that
rainbow-sealed covenant promise
God made, so long ago.

When we think about God’s big agreements with humanity,
God’s most sweeping, important promises,
we don’t often think immediately of Noah and the rainbow.
But God’s made the biggest promise of all –
to humanity,
to the creatures we share this earth with
and to the earth itself:
“I will not destroy you again.”

Can we honour this promise that God made to us?
The corruption and disregard for one another
that God saw before the flood
are still very much a part of our world today;
we still treat one another poorly,
or at least,
we don’t speak out
when see others
being treated poorly.

We see how the fulfillment of human desires,
like ambition, wealth,
a comfortably unthinking lifestyle,
create economic divides and unsafe conditions
in our communities,
tear apart nations,
and harm the rest of creation.
We allow the fulfillment of our own similar desires
to make us participants in those very same creation-harming things.

But God has invited us to participate instead
in his covenant of care
by placing his good creation in our hands
to love and care for,
as God himself does;
people, plants, animals, water, land and sky alike.
As men and women of faith,
part our Christian witness is to live in a way
that shares who God is and what he's all about with other people,
and God loves this world in all its parts.
So my Lent challenge for us this Sunday is to ask ourselves:
can we make the same promise to God
that God's made to us,
when it comes to creation?
Can we participate in this part
of God's saving and renewing work in the world, too,
living in ways that ensure
every living thing
can experience the good and abundant life
promised by that first rainbow?
Thanks be to God!
Amen.