

### **“Never Again” – Gen 9:8-17**

Tsunami’s in Indonesia. Drought in Kenya. Mudslides in the Philippines. Earthquakes in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A massive Gulf hurricane. Buildings collapsing under the weight of snow in Europe and Russia. A sunny January in Vancouver. “The sky is falling!” – or so some would have us believe. For whatever reason, we feel a need to believe that the world is a static place, unchanging, with highly-repetitive cycles of seasons, and weather patterns that are entirely predictable, and when experience shows us that the reality is otherwise, we want to blame the calamitous outcomes on somebody – on the Mayor, the Governor, the President, the director of FEMA, illegal immigrants, gays, SUV drivers, malicious CEO’s, and when all else fails, blame God. There is a long history of people taking selected portions of the Old Testament out of context to justify blaming God for such calamities, contending that God is remote, stern, legalistic, vengeful, and downright intimidating. Bear with me as I put some ‘counter-spin’ on that view, because I find the Old Testament to portray a God every bit as full of grace and compassion as we find in the New Testament.

I contend our reading from Genesis shows God as full of grace and mercy in the Old Testament right back to the beginning. This particular episode concludes the Flood story, a story that is part of the primeval or pre-patriarchal narrative that forms the first section of the book of Genesis. That narrative opens with the chaos at the very beginning of the universe, and then carries us through God’s bringing order into that chaos in sequence of the separation of land and water, the origins of life both in the sea and upon the land, and the somewhat disastrous effect of bringing people into this ‘perfect’ creation. From that high point, the very introduction of the first people, the Genesis tale records a downhill slide, beginning with murder in the garden and ending with the peoples rising in their ever-on-going struggles to build a monumental tower to try to climb onto God’s throne and claim it for themselves.

A world-shaping Flood seems deeply rooted in the very DNA of all peoples, since almost all peoples have legends referring to it. It seems that the authors of Genesis were aware of the older Babylonian flood story as there is some evidence they have relied upon both oral and even written traditions of that event. Here, however, the Priestly Writer clearly understands the event as an act of God, a move to correct what God saw as an error in His creation through getting rid of these nasty people-creatures [Gen 6:7 – “I am sorry that I have made them”]. But God didn’t – get rid of them, that is. According to our tradition Noah listened to God’s warning and instructions, and through faithful response provided a vital link from early to late creation. We all remember the story of Noah and his ark, with animals of all kinds in pairs, tossed on a dark and stormy sea with rain worthy of the We(s)t Coast, and then finally the sun breaking through, and the dove returning with the branch in its mouth, and the ark bumping into and settling gently upon the re-emerging dry land.

One has to be a bit cautious about going too deeply into some of the details when using this event in a children’s story, because if we do we discover that one of the first things Noah did upon exiting the ark was to round up some of the animals and fire up the BBQ – actually an altar – and produced a “pleasing odour to God” – I would guess so, after all that time cooped up with the animals and the family! Now if we were to buy into the all-too-common understanding of the Old Testament God as being wrathful and full only of vengeance we would expect Him to instantly zap Noah for such an action;

however, the text [8:21] instead records that God, upon smelling the pleasing odour, made a vow that he would never again curse the ground because of human beings. Apparently it had become clear to God that a side effect of the intelligence of these human creatures was the ability to choose to do evil instead of good, that a natural inclination of the human heart was to evil right from youth, so there was no point blaming the earth or the other creatures, or punishing them for the misdeeds of people. The other creatures would, however, be instilled with the fear of people, not unreasonable since he declared that they were all now legitimate items for the menu.

Now this is the point where we enter into the story with today's reading, in which God makes a covenant with Noah, and to his sons with him. "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 ark (well, minus the ones that contributed to the 'pleasant odour', but ...) ... 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."

Now, I don't know if you caught it, because it slips by pretty quickly both in the text and here in this sermon, but God establishing this covenant is an incredible event, for at least a couple of reasons. First, this is God declaring unilaterally, by himself, that the covenant is in place. Usually a covenant is between two agreeing parties, one of which is usually more prominent than the other, and so far this is the case. But this covenant is declared by God, favouring his people, with nothing required from them. This covenant did not come about through Noah groveling and pleading for God not to visit such a disaster upon them again, please. It came about simply because Noah said 'thanks' in the only way he knew how, and God's heart was touched. Secondly, this covenant is unconditional. God declares it to be in place, and it is. Moreover, the covenant lays an obligation upon God, but not upon his people. It is a simple, clear, unconditional promise by God to treat his creation more kindly. Even more stunning is that the covenant is all-inclusive, covering "all flesh". No favoured groups. No special interests. No particular mercy to the flesh that grovels the best. And note especially that "Noah and all his descendants" here clearly means all peoples: not just Jews, because this is long before Abraham, but as Noah and his family stand symbolically as the point of regeneration of all flesh on earth the descendants of Noah include every living person on the planet. This is not a text of God's exclusive favour upon one small group, this is an understanding of the Creator's covenant with all creatures.

But the most spectacular part of this covenant story is the introduction of the rainbow as a symbol of the covenant. Setting up a symbol or a monument like a pile of stones was a common practice of sealing a covenant between people, a reminder to both parties that an arrangement had been struck, so that every time someone walked by they would be reminded of the details of that agreement. What's so stunning here, however, and so different from the usual 'spin' that's put on this story, is who the rainbow symbol is for. Almost always we hear that the rainbow is a symbol for us, reminding us of what God has agreed to, and there is some value in using the symbol that way. But that's not what the text says. According to the scriptural text, the rainbow is there to remind God, so that, as He says, "when the rainbow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the

earth.” Wow! The rainbow is there to remind God, to help him remember the covenant he made.

Now there are probably some of you ready to leap out of your pew and contend that God doesn’t need reminders, because He can’t forget. I’m sorry, but that view is simply not scriptural. Take a deep breath, sit gently back in the pew. To begin, it is right here in scripture text where God declares that the rainbow exists to remind Himself. But most importantly, if you don’t believe that God can forget, how can you begin to believe Him when he declares, “I will remember your sins no more”?

That stunning message of the grace of God, of his mercy that allows Him to forget our sins, begins here in this covenant with Noah and all flesh upon the earth, and extends throughout the history of all flesh, through to His ultimate covenant in the cup of salvation proffered by His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. That message of the grace and mercy of God is consistent throughout both the Old Testament and the New, proclaiming that God’s forgiveness is there because He offers it. Offers it in the full knowledge that our propensity is to evil, right from youth, and that we are steered away from it through hearing of and experiencing His love both directly and in the lives of others who have likewise heard. Offers His love and forgiveness without condition, knowing full well that our inherent weaknesses and vulnerabilities prevent us from ever being good enough to earn his mercy. Offers His love and forgiveness so completely that he would give up His only Son on our behalf as a sacrifice of atonement for all people for all time.

“Never again”, is God’s double promise 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, a promise echoed in Christ’s death and resurrection, a promise echoed again in Paul’s declaration that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, a covenant love unbroken from the beginning to the end.