

New St James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

18 February 2018

The First Sunday in Lent

Rev. Dr. Andrew Fullerton

Genesis 9:16 God says to Noah: “*When I see the bow in the clouds, I will remember my everlasting covenant with every living creature.*”

On the walls of many Church schools, you’ll find the mural of a cartoon menagerie; pairs of elephants, giraffes, lions, and sheep. A grinning, grandfatherly Noah stands on the deck of the Ark under a yellow sun, set in a blue sky, dotted with puffy clouds; and hanging over it all, a rainbow. If it weren’t for that friendly scene, I doubt we’d deem it a child-friendly tale. Like the fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, the un-sanitised version of Noah and his Ark is a dark and terrible story – but it ends in hope.

Noah’s story occurs early in the Book of Genesis. And that book begins well enough. On the first page God makes the world by speaking a Word: “Let it be.” God’s speech makes order from watery chaos. Creation is not random; it’s God’s *ordered* work. It *means* something. We see a faint echo of this when we take the jumble of letters we’ve drawn in a Scrabble game and reorder them, creating a word. We make order out of chaos. Or if we walk through a field of randomly strewn rocks, let’s say, but then come across an inukshuk, we think, “Aha, a human has been at work here, putting the world into meaningful order.” This is what God does. God calls his creation very *good*. And whatever is good is also beautiful and true.

What happens next? There’s a second creation story; this one is more domestic. God makes a Garden and puts a wall around it – which is what paradise means, ‘a walled garden’. Here is order made for *human* habitation; it’s a “safe space” (though not the kind we hear about today). It’s made for us, because to live a *human* life, a life that means something, requires social stability and cultural order. God makes Adam and Eve (that’s us) and gives them license to enjoy paradise. You know what happens next – the snake, the apple, their eyes are ‘opened’, they know good and evil, and their innocence is lost. They’re aware of their nakedness. They’re *self-conscious* now, and for the first time they feel vulnerable and fearful. They cover themselves and want to hide from God. God evicts them from the Garden, into the world ‘east of Eden’, for a life lived by toil, in a world marked by suffering. That’s the world we know.

This is when things begin to go downhill, and we’re just three chapters in! Next comes the story of Cain killing Abel, the first eruption of violence for no other reason than bitter resentment and a heart corrupted by evil intent. How human. Then comes the tale of the Tower of Babel, about the hubris of human ambition, technology over-reaching itself, wanting to be dominant and god-like, and to mess with the proper order of things, rather as our god-like, technical prowess pollutes our environment and violates nature today. (Who says these ancient fables are irrelevant? They portray *our* world too, don’t they?)

Which brings us back to Noah, whose story begins in chapter 6. God now sees how prone these humans are to evil and violence; how they nurse wicked thoughts in their hearts, spoiling the creation he’d called good. “The Lord was sorry he made humans,” says Genesis, “and it grieved him to his heart.” But this sorrow has rage in it. It’s the kind of tearful anger that rises up in us when someone has deliberately, with malice aforethought, ruined something or someone we love dearly. It’s the anger we hear in voices demanding the death penalty, or in vindictive cheers when an enemy’s cities are bombed into oblivion. It’s the anger of meticulous hosts when the party they’ve meticulously planned turns out not to be perfect after all. Or the player who upends the chess board when he sees he can’t win the game. And it’s in the voice of the father who finds his children smoking pot and drinking underage in the rec room. “That’s it!” he shouts. “You’re grounded. This party is *over*.”

But it’s more profound than that. What we see being worked out in the story of Noah is a discovery of the very nature of the God. It’s as though two unreconciled aspects of God’s character must compete for dominance. *That’s* the conflict on which the story turns. On the one hand, there’s God’s sorrow and anger over the wicked mess that humans have become. That sadness and anger stem from the high, high value God places on righteousness, and

justice, and behaviour that maintains the good order of creation. But to be true to *that* value, and that value alone, God simply *must* exact punishment, for the same reason law courts must level sentences on anyone who violates a law. They do it, in part, to show that the values we enshrine in law (if they're good laws) really do *matter*. If they didn't matter, we'd just shrug off the offence, and all crime would be like jaywalking. So, with anger and sadness God says, in the voice of justice and righteousness, "I'm sorry I made humans. I'll blot them out from the face of the earth." In other words, "this party is over". Let the floodwaters return creation to chaos.

But God has another voice, another aspect. It's mercy. And it awakens when God sees Noah. "Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord," says Genesis. This is a strange moment. It almost feels arbitrary. Why Noah? The story gives us no indication that Noah is especially righteous or just, or somehow not as prone to evil as all humans are. So, we don't know why it's Noah. But that God finds favour in Noah must mean that, for whatever reason, God's other aspect, *mercy*, has awoken. And this merciful aspect devises a plan to counter God's angry justice, his plan to blot out the world in a flood. Noah, his family, and the animals will enter this fragile ark of salvation to ride out the coming chaos and destruction. They'll be a tiny remnant of the old order, a life-bearing seed. God's mercy can work with that. It's all God needs to establish a new order once the flood waters of God's anger have done their job.

When the waters recede, God resolves the tug-of-war between these two aspects: mercy and justice. They must meet, make peace, and be integrated. Mercy will forever after hold God's 'blessed rage for order', his justice, in check. Because violence doesn't work, and brutal punishment can't assuage God's anger and sorrow. A return to chaos is not the answer: peace and mercy are. Between a perfect creation and the nothing of chaos, God chooses to stand by the world-as-it-is, and to find a way to love it. As flawed as humans are, God's mercy will work with us. And so, God makes a covenant. It's the first covenant in the Bible and it has the widest reach. "This is the everlasting covenant I make with you, and every living creature, and future generations," says God. But covenants are promises, and God's everlasting promise is this: "Never again will there be a flood destroy the earth." Never again will chaos destroy God's ordered world. God's mercy, by tempering God's justice, will care for creation's beauty, truth, and goodness. And the sign of this covenant promise is the rainbow – not a sign for us, mind you, but, like string tied round the finger, it's a sign and reminder for *God*. "When the bow is in the clouds," says God, "I will see it and remember the covenant." The rainbow is God's sword beaten into a ploughshare; it's a sign of God's commitment to peace on earth, to the good order of a good creation. Mind you, God does not constrain his sense of justice, just his capacity to destroy.

That's why it's a story of hope – a hope finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who (we do our best to believe) is the way God has found to love us. He's the perfect embodiment of God's merciful, suffering love. *But he's perfectly just too*. Jesus is like us in every way, but without the malice and evil intent we carry in our hearts; and who, rather than condemning us from afar as justice on its own would do, came instead in mercy to dwell with us here, 'east of Eden'. Why? To take into his own self the brutality and grief of life, and to bear the hellish kind of evil only humans can do to each other, by dying on the cross like a rejected, broken, criminal; and then rising to re-make the world by *opening* it to God's good order, a peaceable kingdom, beautiful, good, and true.

This is the covenant mercy makes. And its sign is not a rainbow, now, but the feast of bread broken, and wine poured.