

Sermon and Reflection for the 6th Sunday of Easter, on Sunday Worship, BBC1
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Broadcast 17 May 2020 – Recorded 20 March 2020

Genesis 8:20 – 9:17

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelt the pleasing odour, the LORD said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.'

Then God said to 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. 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.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow 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.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

Anyone who has spent any time with small children, knows that they are very good at asking WHY? Often these questions are quite impossible to answer! Yet I've found that asking Why doesn't stop as we get older!

Throughout the centuries, people everywhere have grappled with questions of why suffering happens, and why it can often seem so random and unjust. Why do bad things happen to good people? When bad things happen, are we being punished? Who is to blame for all this? We want to make sense of life, but often we cannot find a reason – and when people offer us platitudes, religious or otherwise, it can sometimes feel like worse than no help at all.

Of course, in some ways, we sometimes can answer questions of why – my first husband died young from cancer triggered by years of pipe smoking. But even so, why him, when others weren't affected? We might yearn for clarity, yearn for clear understanding of cause and effect, but sometimes, there's just no way of knowing. The account of Noah grapples with some of these questions.

Many ancient religions of the Near East have stories of a great flood in humanities' earliest days, but the writers of the book of Genesis frame it with a very particular meaning. Perhaps you recall how the story begins, in Genesis 6:5-11:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord.

And so God brings the flood, that wipes out all living things, except for Noah and his family, and all those animals who went into the ark, two by two by two. At the end of the story, there is a fresh start for them all.

But what has changed? Surprisingly, nothing much, as far as we are concerned. As our passage records, God again says 'the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth'. No changes there – human beings remain unfailingly complicated and morally ambiguous, an utter mess of good and bad that cannot be untangled. But, here's the difference, God has changed – at least, God has changed his tactics for dealing with us all.

I will never again curse the ground because of humankind ... nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

It's as though in asking the question, 'who is to blame for all this?' God has decided that the blame, or at least all the consequences of human beings being 'only human' is something he has to shoulder and solve. And his answer is to make a Covenant.

There are many Covenants in the Old Testament. Often God says to his people, you be faithful to me, and I shall be faithful to you, or words to that effect. But this Covenant is all on God's side – it's all about his promises to humanity, to all of creation, with nothing asked in return. Importantly, Covenant is not like Contract – the sort of legal agreement that tends to be more familiar to us. You might say that,

- Contracts deal in transactions, while covenants deal in relationships.
- Contracts concern our interests, while covenants concern our identities.
- Contracts pursue reciprocal benefit, while covenants seek to transform.
- Contracts address competition – if I win, you lose; while covenants address constructive cooperation – if I win, you also win.

God makes a Covenant with us, so that we can all win: so we can be held in loving relationship with him, no matter how far from God it seems we can sometimes stray. So he offers a Covenant that is about the sanctity of life, the integrity of creation, and the dignity of difference – symbolised in the rainbow arching over all that is, just as God’s love does.

When Christians think of Covenant, we should remember Jesus’ words at the last supper, telling us that his broken body and shed blood, are the fulfilment of God’s new Covenant. God’s rescue plan for humanity’s predicament comes to completion in the cross. Here finally death is defeated, and sin is overcome. Though humanity remains unutterably complicated, and hard times bring out both the best and the worst in us, we are not left at that point. God bears the burdens of our failings, the consequences of when we do wrong, and says ‘come here, give me the mess, let me handle all this’, and receive my love, with you always, for ever, and beyond.

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John 14:15-21

Jesus said, ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

Perhaps, on first reading, that sounds a bit like one of those conditional contracts, as if God is saying ‘I’ll only love you if you love me first’. But remember that St John in his letters also wrote ‘We love, because God first loves us’.

The engine of love starts with God, and if we let him love us, he’ll fill us with love for him. And his love for us will help us keep his commandments, the greatest of which is, anyway, all about love: to love him, and to love others – all with the love that he gives us.

So don’t be afraid that you are not good enough. God is good enough, and his love is big enough, and God will never abandon any of us.