



Devastating Floods and Baptisms

Rev Cate Thorn

Year B, Lent 1

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1: 9-15

18 February 2024

Rainbows after devastating floods, desert places and wilderness times after drowning into new life baptism, covenant making and God promise-keeping such are themes that appear in today's readings this first Sunday in Lent.

1 Peter, the third lectionary reading for today, although not read here connects Jesus baptism and the Noah and flood story. It directs us to the part of the Noah tale we, at least as adults, most struggle with. The devastation in the tale, the utter destruction - so few, just eight, were given chance to survive (in religious parlance be saved). Even when the others in the story realised what was going on they weren't given chance. This God is portrayed as closed, merciless in turning away - at least that's how those with power to collect and perpetuate the stories decided it to be told.

The story of Noah is very engaging. With all the animals and a pretty simple storyline, it's an easy one to tell our children. We focus mostly on the action - the building of the Ark, the gathering of the animals, the faithfulness of Noah, the abandonment of all others, the hugeness of the flood, the raven, the dove, the olive branch and end of rain at last. We're on the inside, so it's OK, don't worry about the others who were having too much of a good time to plan for the future.

It's actually quite difficult to put a positive spin in the moral of the story, much less on this version of God. That God would

choose only eight people of the entire Earth and only two of each species to survive!! And let's not even begin to think of the repercussions of having such a narrow genetic pool.

As adults we tend to examine the story, poke around at the details. We can recognise this Noah and Ark tale is a way of telling about a significant event in the life of a community in story form. Recognise it as a way a community makes sense of their experience of the world, to create some rationale so to manage their reality. Though we say this we're easily hooked by and latch onto the bits of the story that disturb our sensibilities. We, perhaps uncritically take the story from its pre-scientific, pre-critical context, plonk it in our scientific, critical world and proceed to critique it from there. Well, our adult selves do.

I've fond memories of this story as a child. I was much taken with the idea that all the animals were saved so we could have them now. The idea they all got on together and how snug and warm the Ark must have been, how safe everyone was, it was immensely comforting. I admit the story merges with the song I loved from a vinyl record we often listened to, the Rover's I think, the Unicorn song, you remember with the chorus, "There were green alligators and long necked geese, some humpty back camels and some chimpanzees, some cats and rats and elephants, but Lord, I'm so forlorn, I just can't find no unicorns," of course the last line changed as the song went on. The unicorn's too busy playing silly games to enter the Ark ... it always saddened me that, I'd like to have seen a unicorn!!

But of course by the time we're adults we're schooled, so less fooled. Sceptical about a God portrayed as One who'd choose to destroy almost all of creation - especially a creation that not much before had been declared good by this same God. There's no logic, only confusion to such a God. We to look with eyes of judgement at the scarcity, to what was taken, destroyed and the paucity of what was preserved. We focus

on the flood and the disaster and, as an afterthought, the rainbow. The rainbow - a reminder of a God who's to be feared, who holds threat of annihilation over us, **unless**. We tend not to see it as a prompt and reminder about who we are, or can be, people who can bring and nurture life, by our choices we turn from doing so. In a funny way, it's the view of a child, one to whom something's always done, who's powerless before, not accepting responsibility for the consequence of not living as covenant people.

The reality of life in this unique and finely tuned world we're privileged to dwell in is that it **does** include times of floods. It does include places of desert and times of wilderness, times when we're made **aware** - frighteningly - that life teeters in precarious balance. Such times and places confront us with our vulnerability, our frailty, our mortality. These aren't things, places or times done **to** us. These are the way things are. How we negotiate them - that's a different matter. Seasons like Lent and Easter invite us to venture into such time and space. Invite us to turn, to face that life and death are close bound. Invite us to turn and face our ways, our habits that bring death. Give us a chance to pay attention, reflect more intentionally upon the consequences of our actions, practice choosing differently.

It's likely at some time there was a devastating flood that nearly wiped out the population of the world that lived around the river Euphrates. The Gilgamesh tablets tell of it, this massive destroying flood tale is common in the ancient stories of many communities, one of almost annihilation - but not.

Have you ever wondered why it's a story that's told and continued to be told? It's curious that it's a common, potent and continuing story. Is it to remind us that we should live fearfully, or to remind us to pay attention and be mindful of our intentions? Is it told to fill us with despair or to give us

hope? Maybe it's told to help **us**, the then future generations to know such events **are** part of life but, as with Easter dawn, not all of it.

Despite this Noah tale suggestion that the few saved were the sensible ones, not the foolish playful ones, (like the unicorns, just saying), we don't have to perpetuate such polarity in our heads. As if to imply that living in life-bringing ways must be drear drudgery and we must be carefully avoidant of delighted playfulness. When we choose to live in ways to sustain, encourage and bring life we're accepting the gracious if terrifying gift of responsibility for and of our power to influence how and if life continues. Good Friday startles us to face such capacity, before Easter dawn breaks. As we look around our world we see that in our hands, such gift given us is knife-edged with curse, just as our life is knife-edged with death.

Maybe this is a coming of age tale - to remind us we're not helpless or victims, we're active agents taking part in what will be future. Life is not done **to us** we choose how we participate in life's continuing in the world, it matters what we do. Fruitfulness and flourishing have better chance when we remember we've **a** place within creation, to take our place with care, aware we've responsibility to all of creation. We've only this planet Earth in its precarious orbit on which we can depend, within which all life is intimately, intricately and interdependently intertwined.