

Sermon 17 May 2020 Genesis Ch8 v20-Ch9 v17

Introduction

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Diane Reeves. I've been coming to St Peters for over 20 years now, and I am also training to be a Reader. This is my third sermon. Any comments or feedback would be gratefully received by email or by text to myself. My phone number is on the front page of the parish website or please message me on zoom if you would like my email address.

Prayer

First let me pray. Father as we consider the story of Noah. Let us hear your words in our hearts, and afterwards, let us consider our responses. Give us time and space for prayer. We seek courage and creativity to be compassionate agents of your transformation in these difficult times, in Jesus name.

Amen

"Contagion"

I wonder if anyone has seen the film "Contagion?" It's a 2011 film by Steven Soderbergh about a new virus which comes from a bat. It sweeps the world becoming a global pandemic, with devastating consequences. Although it's a relatively old film, many people are discovering it now and watching it. There are many comments about it especially on social media. I wonder why that is? Probably it is because the story played out in the film reflects the crisis we're all facing now, with Covid 19 as a global pandemic. One reviewer wrote of the film

Had I watched this movie (a) few months back, it wouldn't have been a big deal, but now it's totally relatable. Literally it's like the current situation was scripted years back (1.)

This quote could have been made around 500BC by any of the people of Judah, a small exiled population in Babylon. This was when the book of Genesis was first written with the story of Noah and the flood included. The story of the flood and the ark is an old one, appearing in stories as far back as 2700BC and was known to the Babylonians Assyrians and Sumerians, so why did the writers of Genesis include it in their book, and give it such prominence?

You only need to read a little of Lamentations, Ezekiel or Jeremiah to see what sort of thing had happened to the people of Judah around 500BC. Their civilisation had been destroyed by the Babylonian invasions, there was suffering, killing, torture, famine and starvation. The temple had been destroyed. People died on the streets and even ate their own children's dead bodies. Most people were dead, but a small remnant of the population was taken away to Babylon as slaves. How shocking and awful that must have been, how traumatised and broken would that small remnant population have been. "Where is our GOD now," they must have asked themselves, "Why did this happen?" "Are the Babylonian gods more important than our GOD?" Maybe they were losing their faith in GOD?

Kathleen O'Connor (2.) argues in her beautifully written commentary of Genesis Chapters 1-25 that the writers of Genesis included the story of Noah and the flood as a major part of these early chapters to be, as the commentator on "Contagion" puts it, "totally relatable" to the experiences of the people of Judah. In the Genesis story God is described as the author, creator, destroyer and re-creator of the cosmos. This portrays GOD as all powerful over and above any other gods. GOD is described in this way to make it clear to the remnant of the people of Judah as slaves in Babylon, that their GOD is *the* GOD that rules everything, and they can continue their faith in him. In the story GOD caused this enormous disaster, because of the wickedness of the people, so therefore he is still in charge. GOD is the most powerful GOD. The gods of the people of Babylon are not more powerful.

Covenant

In this reading GOD then makes a covenant with Noah and his family, the remnant of humankind, and all their descendants. This promise is universal, to everyone, the planet, all living creatures, birds and domestic animals, that GOD will never destroy the earth or mankind again with a flood, that there will always be seasons. Verse 21 states that the inclination of human hearts is towards bad behaviour or wickedness, or sin. GOD is still pained by that sin, but he has decided to work within the world, and within humankind to deal with it, not to destroy the world on account of it.

Much as we are longing for a route map out of the lockdown that many of us find so frustrating, depressing or terrifying, GOD here is showing the remnant of the people of Judah his route map out of their current plight. He knows they have nothing, but he will promise to work with people about wickedness and not send them disasters on account of their own sin, that sin that we all have, on account of being human.

As we Christians see it, this is the long journey of 500 years to the coming of the Messiah, GOD incarnate as man. Through the Messiah Jesus, GOD will deal with our sin. Jesus will take that cup of poison and drink it, for all of us, providing the forgiveness of that sin, making us all children of GOD and brothers and sisters of Christ.

So, GOD does not send disasters to frighten and kill us, or as a form of judgement. GOD loves us. He is alongside us in our distress. GOD did not send coronavirus to us, despite what some people think.

As Graham Tomlin, the Bishop of Kensington said recently in Church Times (3.), the crisis of coronavirus is more likely to be a form of judgement by ourselves on ourselves and the world we have created. One thing he mentions is that coronavirus is likely to be a transition of a bat virus into the meat eaten by humans. Like previous pandemics in 1918 and 2009, the original source of disease came from intensive and potentially unethical management of animals for meat. This leads us on to a form of judgement for ourselves about how we as people treat animals, in terms of intensive farming, wet marketing and indeed eating them at all. GOD's covenant in our reading is to all animals as well as all people. What can we learn from this crisis that will show us a way forward with greater fairness and justice towards both people and animals?

The understanding of the people of 2500 years ago was very much different to ours now. The Noah story for them, like the film Contagion for us, provided a different narrative from their own experience, which was sufficiently similar, that enabled them to have new ways of understanding and talking about the trauma they had experienced. As well as a new explanation, it provided them with a positive view of the future with steps ahead which were reassuring in the face of the devastation they experienced.

So here we are today. We have suffered collectively and individually in the Coronavirus pandemic. The grief, loss and mourning roll up like a giant tidal wave engulfing us. We are awash with mental health problems and anxiety about the future. People fear they may drown in debts caused by unemployment. Loneliness seeps in for those isolated alone. But our GOD is here. He is with us, as he was with Noah and his family, and now through the Holy Spirit of truth, as Jesus promises in our Gospel today (4.). He does promise us as he did Noah a new beginning, a re-creation from where we are now, despite all the loss, death and disaster of coronavirus.

In verse 13 GOD points out the rainbow in the clouds, as the sign of his covenant to the remnant surviving after the flood. GOD asks nothing of the people but that they see the rainbow and understand that GOD is not a destroyer, but a re-creator.

Applications

So how can we work with GOD to re-create the world around us? Lockdown has forced us to slow down and re-evaluate our lives. Even those who have been very busy providing essential services have experienced things very differently. There will be many answers to these questions but here are a few thoughts.

Noah's great strength was that he listened keenly to GOD. Once he was off the ark, before anything else, he gave a sacrifice to GOD. What will be our sacrifice to GOD? One suggestion might be finding more time to pray, and to listen to GOD ourselves. Prayer is the heart of our Christianity, bringing us closer to GOD

Secondly, GOD created animals and makes his covenant of re-creation in verse 10 with them as well as us. Is there anything we can do to reduce animal exploitation? Have we evaluated our own eating habits in terms of factory farmed animals?

Thirdly, let us tread lightly on the ground as we come out of lockdown. Let us be a church which is a community of compassion for mental health, grief and loneliness. There will be many who need a friend on their journey from now on.

Conclusion

When I go out for a walk, I love to see pictures in windows and little stones people have painted, with rainbow designs and thank you messages for key workers. It reminds me, much as it did the Babylonian exiles that GOD is there for everyone, GOD re-creates after tragedy and disaster. We can rely on Him, and He will do all the heavy lifting. As Jesus says, we will not be left orphaned, he is coming to us. The Holy Spirit is with us. Because He lives, so we will live in him. Amen

Diane Reeves 17 May 2020