

Lent 1B February 21, 2021, St. Anne's
Genesis 9:8–17; Psalm 25:1–10; 1 Peter 3:18–22; Mark 1:9–15

Whenever I turn on the news there is a part of me that's anxious about what I might see. Now these days, news about COVID-19 crowds out most of the news about, well... *everything* else happening in the world. But sadly, while COVID may crowd the headlines, the pandemic hasn't stopped other bad things from happening in the world. And news about dictators and criminals and atrocities is still there. Of course, atrocities are nothing new in the world - there have *always* been people and groups using terror and bullying and threats as a tactic to gain power and riches. But, I have to admit, *some* days when I hear the news of yet another act of violence or brutality perpetrated by people that seem bent on evil, I wish **I** had the power to simply wipe hate-filled and evil people off the face of the planet. I *know* as a Christian I'm called by God to love my neighbour - but I find it really hard to contemplate that response for those in say, extremist groups, or those running organized crime syndicates, or those who seem to *delight* in spreading hate and death or constant abuse against those who are just trying to live their lives.

In today's OT reading we hear a small section of the story of Noah. In this story God actually **does** what I sometimes *wish* I could do – God wipes the evil doers off the face of the world. In this story God uses a massive flood to kill all the evil and sinful people and start again with the *one* righteous man in the world - Noah, along with his family and the animals on the ark. And yet, despite, or maybe **because** of, the dark place inside me where I wish **I** had the ability to do that, I find this a deeply disturbing story.

Now, at first glance you might think today's reading about God's rainbow covenant is an odd reading for Lent. In part, this is because we've turned the story of Noah

into a kind of children's adventure tale. We give kids small 'arks' made by companies like Fisher Price, filled with pairs of animals like giraffes, elephants and zebras. Sunday school rooms often sport wall hangings and murals depicting rainbows, and smiling people in a floating zoo. But as the *bible* tells it, this is **not** a cute children's story. It's the disturbing story of the destruction of an entire civilization. I think maybe we trivialize it as a way to avert our mind's eye from the picture of people gasping for breath as the waters rise above them. Or from dead bodies floating past those smiling animals on the ark.

One of the issues that evokes the most moral outrage and pain for most of us, is the unjust suffering of the innocent. The question 'Why do *bad* things happen to *good* people' is one of the most difficult challenges of faith. But *this* story is **not** about the unjust suffering of the innocent. Quite the contrary. In the tale of Noah and the flood, we're told quite *emphatically* that the *innocent* are *saved*. It's the guilty and *wicked* who are wiped out. This story is about **bad** things happening to **bad** people. Which of course, is exactly what **I'm** wishing for when I want to eradicate the people who do horrifying things in our world today. But even if this **is** about the destruction of an **evil** civilization, I'm not the only one who feels a little queasy about it. Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman writes, "Contemplating the destruction of an entire civilization *is* disturbing, and so it *should be*. Sometimes the beauty of Torah is that it makes us uncomfortable. It forces us to face what our contemporary secular society allows us to avoid."

But... but, I think we miss the point if we focus on those few 'others' that we name as 'evil'. It's very comforting to think that people like the leaders of ISIS, or Hitler or the heads of large criminal syndicates making money trafficking people and drugs, are somehow fundamentally 'different' than us. We'd all like to believe that

we are the innocent ones and the evil is found in those ‘others’. But the potential for destructiveness and violence exists in every society – and indeed to a greater or lesser extent in *every one* of **us**. And, the more we learn about how the human brain works, and how our genes work to influence what we do, the more we come to understand that human evil is *complex* - sometimes as much a sickness as a sin.

Which raises - for *me* at least - the question of what *would* be ‘bad enough’ that it would deserve this kind of ‘final solution’. It’s easy to see evil in an action like burning someone to death or taking a machine gun to a public location and mowing down dozens of innocent people. But, what about the bureaucrats who haggled over the *nuances* of what constitutes ‘genocide’ while millions suffered and died in Darfur or Rwanda? Does **that** constitute evil? Maybe drug lords are evil but what about the dealers on the streets selling small amounts of illegal drugs to make money to feed their own addiction? How about those who never do **physical** violence but who demean others emotionally or spiritually – leaving the body intact but destroying the self-image and capacity to love? Where *is* the line between *ordinary* human sinfulness and weakness, and evil, unforgivable acts?

The story of the flood relates a fearful drama of evil, punishment, and salvation. And by ignoring the most chilling part of the story, we trivialize and discount its message – that God **cares** about the effects of our decisions and actions. God **cares** whether we act for the good of others, or not. So, while no one **I** know is responsible for genocide or starting a war, we **do** all bear responsibility when **we** do *anything* that causes others to suffer in body, mind or spirit. And sadly, *that’s all* of us.

Now, this may all seem pretty depressing - but there *is* good news in the story of the flood. The story of the flood **is** a disturbing story of destruction and judgement and we should *not* ignore that message. But it's **also** the story of a God who cares deeply about **life** and wants **good** for *all* the creatures of this world. A God who **is**, despite what we might think of this method, willing to try to restore and redeem what's been broken. And so, it's an invitation to **us** to reflect on the ways *we* contribute to the brokenness and violence of this world - whether physical, emotional or spiritual - *and* repent of our own *complicity* in it. Because at the end of the story of Noah, God disrupts the cycle of violence. Having deployed violence to end violence, God looks at the results and decides to *never do it again*. The story doesn't tell us **why** God makes this decision, but we can imagine a loving God having the same horrified reaction as us. All that horror and suffering, and the sin and evil *isn't even totally wiped out!* It's as if **God** struggles here with the problem of sin and, having seen the horrifying results of using *violence* as a means to try to solve it, determines to initiate another means of resolution, one that *doesn't* involve destruction and violence.

And God **not only** *decides* never to do it again, the story says God then creates a covenant with *all of creation* that **binds** God's own self against using *this* way of dealing with sin again, no matter *what* happens in the world. No matter what happens going forward, the rainbow is a promise that God will **never** try to deal with sin and violence by using *violence*. And **that** is something that we all need to remember. Violence, whether great or small, whether physical or emotional, has a way of sucking us all in and *inevitably* it just leads to *more* violence. It is up to *each of us* to break that cycle. Because if *violence* is the answer then we're **all** doomed.

But it doesn't *have* to be that way! We not *only* all have the capacity for violence and hate, we *also* **all** have the capacity for love and forgiveness. We're **all** made in the image of God - a God who was willing to come into this world in the person of Jesus the Christ and accept suffering, and even death on a cross, rather than resort again to violence in response to violence. And despite our own brokenness and weakness, *we all* **do** have the capacity to **choose** the way of love and forgiveness and redemption, rather than *hate*. Indeed, we are made in the image of our loving God and goodness is an *essential part* of our humanity. And this is true, *despite* the existence of the *minority* of people who willfully engage in evil acts. They just get all the headlines.