

Sermon: I have set my bow in the clouds

(Preached by Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, Feb. 21, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

2012 is a hugely successful Hollywood disaster film that portrays a cataclysmic flood which consumed much of the planet earth. The plot follows the ordeal of a writer / limousine driver, in a series of heroic actions to extract his family from certain and imminent death, then rendezvous eventually with a fleet of technologically advanced arks, built to save the luck few from the flood. The film made liberal use of the Mayan calendar, which was supposed to have ended in December 21, 2012. Credit to the producer and director of the film, they certainly profited handsomely on the fear and anxiety of the general public in the years leading up to 2012.

I recall taking part in a youth led event in my former congregation in Montreal during that time. The presenter, a bright young lady in the youth group, explained the Mayan prophesy to her peers. Tying loosely to the Genesis account of the flood and the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation, she urged the young people to repent, to turn back to God before it is too late. I supposed her intention was good, but her method had caused quite a stir. I remember staying behind after the presentation, trying to comfort a number of young people, some were crying in anguish. I took time to answer questions they had, reminding them not to take end-world predictions too seriously, and assuring them that even if the Apocalypse should arrive tomorrow, our God who is merciful and compassionate, would have already prepared a place for us, the faithful. A quick prayer and a pat on the back had brought smiles back to those young people. They went home relatively cheerful, thankfully and hopefully unharmed by the talk of the end of the world.

Yet the bigger question remain — How do we as Christians see God? How do we understand the Creator who brought the flood to the created, and who will in time bring the Apocalypse? How do we relate to such a God? How do we worship such a God?

The Lectionary passage of Genesis 9:8-17, which was just read, centres around the regret of God for sending the flood. The phrase ‘never again’ appears repeatedly, at least three times by my count. In verse 11, “**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”. In verse 15, “and the waters shall **never again** become a

flood to destroy all flesh”. In fact, ‘regret’ seems to be the central aspect of God in the entire flood account. It was God who felt sorry, as in Genesis 6:6, that he made humankind on the earth in the first place, because God saw their wickedness was great in the earth.

This wickedness of humanity, though not explicitly laid out in details, cannot be overlooked. Readers of the first 8 chapter of Genesis would be able to piece together a trajectory of the intensification of violence. From the simple disobedience of Adam and Eve, to the first murder — the fratricide of Cain killing Able. God responded by punishing Cain to wander the earth, yet placing a mark of protection on him, so “whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance” (Genesis 4:15). This misguided grace of God is further twisted by the descendent of Cain, when Lamech (the great great, great, grandson) bragged to his wives, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” (Genesis 4:23-24).

Violence begets violence! This intensification of violence of humanity eventually brought out the divine violence, culminating in the great flood that destroyed all flesh, well, almost all. Noah alone was righteous before God, he and his family of 8 found favour before the Lord. They and a handful of animals in pairs were saved through the ark. After the flood, they were instructed to be fruitful and multiply, so as to repopulate the earth.

It should be noted that the story of Noah and the flood though detailed only in the Bible, the story’s remnants have survived in various forms in different cultures. In detailed examination of the written Chinese character of ‘ark’ 船, one would find it is constructed by three distinct parts: ‘boat’ 舟, ‘number eight’ 八, and ‘people’ 口. So an ark is a boat with eight people in it. The actual story may not have been preserved, but the memory of it lingers.

Coming back to the Genesis account, to the question I posed earlier: ‘How do we as Christians understand God? Particularly the one who is capable of extinction-level violence, and the one who is prone to ‘regret’. How could we relate to such a God? The answer is in the idea of a ‘covenant’. In today’s passage, the word ‘covenant’ appears repeatedly — seven times in total by my count. Every ‘never again’ is preceded and supported by the word ‘covenant’. As in verse 11, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood...”.

A covenant is different than a contract. A contract often entails a written agreement between two parties, outlining what each party is supposed to do, what the agreed upon penalties for non-fulfillment, and how the contract itself maybe rendered void should the non-fulfillment persists. In short, contract is conditional. Whereas, a covenant is un-conditional. In the case of God making a

covenant with Noah and with all flesh, God is making a unilateral and unconditional promise to never again.

Never again will God punish humanity with a world-wide flood. Never again will God exercise divine violence so indiscriminately in such a scale. Never again will God regret God's own creation. Rather than resorting to destruction, God will now lean towards re-creation.

This covenantal nature of God, first appears in the Scripture after the flood, will re-surface again and again. Through this Lenten season in the following weeks, we will be exploring in more details this characteristic of God.

I do want to say a few words on the sign of the covenant, particularly in verse 13, "I have set my bow in the clouds". Note that in many English translations of the Bible, the word 'rainbow' is often used, rather than the word 'bow', which is technically more accurate.

Bow and arrows, as an instrument of war, is fearsome. It strikes from afar, often silently without warning. In the hand of an expert marksman, it could be quite accurate. However in actual battlefield, the killing effect of bow and arrows is often indiscriminate, random.

In Canaanite and Mesopotamia iconography, various gods are depicted as carrying a bow. Most notably the war goddess of Anat, and Marduk the patron god of the city Babylon. In those cases, carrying a bow symbolizes the conquering prowess of a warlike god.

In the Scripture, arrows are often equated as lightening (Psalm 18:4, Zechariah 9:14), as terror (Psalm 91:5), as natural disasters (Habakkuk 3:9) and as divine punishment (Deuteronomy 32:23-24). Therefore, we could surmise that the idea of God laying down his bow in the cloud, is a reminder that God is laying down his weapon of choice, his instrument of divine punishment.

It is a reminder to both God and humanity. To God, particularly when, not if, when people commit evil again in the sight of God, when God is about to mete out justice indiscriminately, God will be reminded by bow laid in the cloud. It is a reminder to people when storm begins to gather, when speculation of the world ending disaster abound, when we are uncertain of God's intention, when we see the bow in the cloud, we are reminded again of the covenantal God who promised never again.

Not that long ago I came across an illustrated children Bible, title "Growing in God's Love, A Story Bible", edited by Elizabeth Caldwell and Carol Wehrheim, a sort of 21st-century effort to open up the Bible for young children. They are many good things about this work including reflective questions of what one 'hears, sees, and acts', the inclusion of more women and their contributions, and a concluding section called 'Listening to Jesus'.

Caldwell, as a Presbyterian minister and a longtime educator has done a remarkable job in this story bible, seeking to engage the imagination of children in their journey to seek God.

However, I should note that in her recounting of the flood story, God is conspicuously absent in the first part. Somehow, it just rained and rained until almost all living thing have died. In that story, God only speaks at the end, saying “Don’t be afraid that the world will end. . . .I’m going to make a promise to all of you, to the whole world and to everyone who lives in it. I will keep you safe.”

I suppose being kept safe is a good thing. I suppose the thrust of such an attempt to portray God, is not to scare off young readers too early by the destructive capability of God, but to focus solely on the aspect of the covenantal loving God. Nevertheless, growing up in such a skewed understanding of God, I do wonder if young readers might feel cheated, perhaps frightened to tears one day ,when they are old enough to read the actual account. Will a future minister need to explain...no, no, no, God have set his bow in the clouds...never again.

Perhaps we could take comfort in the fact that faith formation is a process. Not unlike our understanding of God as progressively revealed in the Scripture. We cannot and will not know God solely based on the account of the flood, but we are beginning to understand God, and God’s covenantal love for all humanity. Next week, in the second Sunday of Lent, we shall reflect on God’s covenant with Abraham, the so-called father of faith.

For today, let me conclude by the passage of 1 Peter 3:18, a sort of a sneak preview to God’s plan of salvation — “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God... (continues in verse 21) as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” Praise be to God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen