

Feb. 21, 2021
Christ the Servant, Reston
Lent 1
Genesis 9:8-17

Well, it looks like the ancient Babylonians were telling a story about a great flood and a boat long before the Semites were telling one about Noah. In the older Babylonian version, the gods up in the area above the sky look down and see that there are too many people on the earth. Waaay too many people. There is a problem with overpopulation. So, to solve the problem of overpopulation the gods send a great flood which submerges all land mass and wipes out all peoples – except Atrahasis who builds a great vessel to withstand the catastrophe. In the aftermath of the flood the gods replace worldwide epic tragedies which happen maybe only once in an era with local tragedies which happen to people all the time. The Babylonian story was told to explain why there were such things as stillbirths and infant deaths – tragedies with which people had first-hand experience a whole lot in the ancient world. Where does tragedy come from? The gods!

Our Bible writers used the framework of this story to tell a tale with a different meaning. Athrahasis morphed into Noah. The great vessel morphed into an ark. But our Bible writers used the tale – not to explain away tragedy – to explain the blessings of life. In our Genesis version, after the waters receded, a great rainbow appeared in the sky and God said, “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” Now, whenever there appeared a rainbow in the sky it would be a sign. But it would not be a sign for *people* to see and remember God’s promise, but a sign for GOD to see and remember. God said, “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.” God needs reminders, too! God needs signs.

As John Dominic Crossan once said, “The Bible is true. Some of it actually happened.” You can believe that the story of Noah and the flood actually happened if you like. Heck, you can believe the Babylonian story of Athahasis if you want. It doesn’t make a difference. That’s not the point. The point of the story is that God made a covenant – a promise – with humanity that God is no longer in the business of bringing punishment (as if God ever was). Now God is in the business of bringing promise and hope and salvation. The story tells a truth! God is about promise and hope and salvation.

Oh, that was only the first of the promises God made with the people he created. God prodded Abraham to get up and go – to a land of promise – and with the promise that he would be the patriarch of a great nation which would be led into the promised land with God’s eternal blessing. God kept that promise by sending Moses to lead that exodus and God promised again that this nation would be his chosen people. God reaffirmed the promise with David and went one further by revealing that David’s lineage would result in an eternal royal kingdom – the promise which was fulfilled when the angel told Mary that she would bring forth a Son, name him Jesus, and give him the throne of his father David and “of his kingdom there will be no end.”

God keeps God’s promises. In the end God keeps God’s promises. I had a seminary professor (my favorite professor, actually ... Dr. Walter Bouwman) who loved to read novels. But he always read the last chapter first. When asked why he always read the last chapter first Dr. Bouwman would say, “Because I want to find out how it ends.” And then Dr. Bouwman would tell us that he had read the last chapter of God’s story and had found out that, in the end, the good guy wins. The last chapter of the Bible, Revelation, tells us that, ultimately, good wins out over evil.

Better yet, Dr. Bouwman would tell us, to look beyond Revelation and see Christ coming back to us from the future each and every time we receive his

body and his blood at the table of Holy Communion. There, as we receive the body which has been broken and the blood which has been shed, God reveals to us the last chapter. There, out of the future, comes to us eternal life and victory over sin, death, and all things evil. God keeps God's promises. We have read the last chapter. God's bow is in the sky.

One of the hardest things about our Covid shutdown has been fasting from Holy Communion. Yes, Lent is to be a time for fasting, but certainly not from Holy Communion. I miss it. You miss it. You have told me that you miss it. We look for signs – like a rainbow in the sky – that the pandemic is coming to an end. And we see them. The infection rate has come down. The hospitalization rate has come down. The death rate is on its way down. People I am friends with have been vaccinated. The guy who walks his dog past my house twenty times a day has had his second shot already. I am experiencing vaccine envy! So, there is hope that the time we can gather again at the Lord's supper to receive the sacrament which connects us directly with God's promises may come sooner than later.

But as we wait, be assured that we are not absent from the promises of God. The cross of Christ marked on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday is washed away by Thursday morning. But the cross of Christ which was marked on our foreheads at baptism never goes away. The minister dips her finger into the water and marks the cross on the forehead of the baptized, states that person's name, and then says, "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." The moistness on that baby's forehead probably evaporates before the parents have been seated, but the promise of that mark was lasts forever.

In that moment God made a promise. This child would be in God's arms forever. Death would not be the final chapter. Forgiveness was bestowed. Salvation was bestowed. Deliverance was bestowed. Forever. That is why it is "ok" – even recommended – for us to mark ourselves with the cross of Christ whenever we can... not only on Ash Wednesday, but in the context of our

liturgy, or as part of your devotions. Marking the sign of the cross is a sign – a thing which jogs our conscience. Yes. I have been marked with the cross of Christ forever!

Back in medieval times the people in Germanic regions had the belief that for the 40 year period before the destruction of the earth no rainbow would appear in the sky. Therefore, whenever it rained and the rainbow came out, they rejoiced. The world would go on!

The world *will* go on, my friend. It will go on! We have read the last chapter and the good guy wins! Yes, the signs now point to the end of the Covid epidemic. But, the greatest sign of all, the sign of the cross, tells us that – in the end – our boat will land on a safe shore and there will be life and there will be new life. God has given us her promise on that. And God keeps her promises!