

Scripture

Genesis 9:8–17

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that 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.” 12 God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Psalms 25:1–10

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

8 Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
9 He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

1 Peter 3:18–22

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20 who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. 21 And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God from a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Sermon: Never Again

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. To the culture that wrote the genesis accounts of creation, water represented chaos.

Moving, mixing, no firm place to plant your feet – everything insubstantial and fluid. Picture an ocean storm at night, with mountains of water on the move, waves breaking and crashing, wind gusting; water below, water around, water falling from above. A cacophony of noise: wind shrieking, and waves thundering.

The chaos at the beginning was pure uncontained unpredictable power, surging in all directions. This was God's beginning expression of creation. God contained and controlled the waters; and set boundaries for it 'This far and no further.' Dry land, and life in all its multitudinous forms came next.

The Creator God is the one who holds the forces of chaos at bay to allow life to begin, and to flourish. God blessed this life, telling it to go forth and multiply, and so it did.

But within this life, echoes of the chaos remained. It manifested itself as sin; rebellion against God's order. This rebellion first took the form of a lack of faith in God's created order, and the pride of thinking that humans knew better and could decide their own course of action.

This led to division and blame between the first couple, and by the second generation this division had escalated to murder. By the tenth generation, God had had enough.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

The evil unleashed upon the earth by humans was foul enough that God regretted even making us. This is no small thing: the very God who tamed and controlled the cosmic chaos in the beginning was appalled and dismayed at the chaos that raged within the human heart.

And so God relented. Seeing humanity's lust for chaos, he gave them over to it completely by releasing the primordial chaos that he had been holding back. The waters returned with force, crushing and crashing, wiping all traces of life off the surface of the earth but for one tiny, insignificant boat, crammed to overflowing with the only life that was left on the planet; a few seeds adrift in the currents.

In time, God caused the waters to abate again to their ordained places and surveyed what had transpired. God discovered that retribution had not resolved the issue. The earth had been cleansed, but God's heart was still grieving; still broken over humanity's hard-heartedness.

The damage could not be undone; punishment had not coerced humans into changing their ways. Fear can induce us to modify our behaviour in the short term, but as soon as we think we aren't being watched then we're right back at it again. God experienced the futility of retributive, punitive justice.

In fact, punishment is not really justice at all. Taking the life of a perpetrator does not restore the life of the victim. Locking a huckster in a cell for twenty years does not return the life savings of the couple that was swindled. There may be momentary pleasure in watching a hurter being hurt, but that is a hollow satisfaction indeed.

And really, we have a very poor definition of justice in our modern culture. Merriam-Webster writes of justice as the impartial meting out of rewards or punishment. Those on Facebook will have had a preview of what I wrote for the latest News 'n Views in which I question this assumption. Should justice really be impartial and objective, or are we rather to let love guide our processes of justice?

This morning's scripture came at a very good time, because it appears that God wrestled with exactly this question. God had reached an impasse; not because he was lacking power, but precisely because he has so much power.

Two strong movements within God were God's unstoppable purpose to create a peaceful cosmos, and God's unquenchable compassion for destructive, recalcitrant humanity. God's ordered universe was consistently being undone by the chaos still ruling our hearts, and so God warred between his desire for a harmonious world and his love for the creatures messing it all up.

So, God hung his war bow in the sky and said 'Never again. Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

God knew that vindication and punishment could not save humanity – only destroy it – so instead God opted for forgiveness, patience and love for creation and for humanity, despite the knowledge that the human heart will never change on its own. God chose to let love guide his justice.

Those creatures made in God's image – which is us – will pretty much always resist God, yet God laid down his weapons against creation and humankind. God put the undrawn bow in the clouds pointing away from the earth and into heaven.

A single act of mercy is one thing, but in this action of hanging his bow God the creator and judge of all creation declared his decision to forgo for all time his sovereign right to destroy the rebellious members of his creation. It is an unthinkable surrendering of divine power. It doesn't make sense by our worldly standards.

And really, this whole covenant that God proposed is quite the opposite of what we would expect from the supreme ruler of all the universe, because God did not lay down the law on humanity, who are the real agents of chaos.

Rather, this new agreement required nothing whatsoever of creation. It set limits only upon God. Noah never said a word. 'As for me,' God said, 'never...never...never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' Three times God said this.

'I am establishing my covenant with you.' Seven times, God made clear that this is his covenant; initiated by him, and upheld by him.

The bow in the sky, pointed at the heavens, was a reminder to God to limit himself, to control his divine power. 'I will see it,' said God, 'and I will remember.' God repeats this point to make it clear.

This is important for us to note. This sign was meant to act as a reminder to God not to allow the waters of chaos to reign; the bow was not a reminder to humanity. There is a danger in looking at the sign and recalling the covenant that God made that we may become bold to sin, thinking that we are immune from the consequences of our actions. Some people do use the rainbow in this way.

The rainbow is not the symbol of our exemption or entitlement; it is God's sign of restraint. It reminds us that we are living under grace.

In hanging up his bow, God limits God's own power. God limits God's own freedom to act. This self-limiting action is seen again in the incarnation, as Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Changing from divine eternal being into a mortal frame was self-limitation in the extreme, and still, God went further. This self-limitation found its climax as Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

This is the first Sunday of our Lenten journey, when we turn our eyes toward Golgotha, and we contemplate the sacrifice of Jesus.

God's covenant with Noah helps us to understand Jesus' actions; what they meant, and what they still mean today. Jesus was not a sacrifice to appease an angry God who was so desirous of blood that he would be satisfied even with the blood of his own son.

To sacrifice means to relinquish something precious for something of even more value. It's not a worthless and wasteful discarding or destruction of something beautiful, but the giving up of something good for something greater. In the case of Jesus, the self-limiting covenant God was willing to allow a part of himself to die so that we could live. God has declared human life to be very precious indeed.

Traditionally, this season of Lent is characterized by self-limitation and sacrifice. It's the time of year that many Christians will exercise self-discipline in certain areas of their lives. Often people 'give up something for Lent.'

I'm not sure that God is impressed with us refraining from eating chocolate for forty days. If sacrifice mean to give up something good for something better, what is the better thing that results from our deprivation? Is this a meaningful sacrifice, or just some smug thing we do to signal our piety to others?

What if instead there was some way that we could imitate the covenantal God by giving up on some rightful claim that we have in order to show grace to another human being? If God, who alone has the right to judge, surrenders his right, should we not also treat other people as beings that are precious to God?

Perhaps for Lent we could relinquish our right to retaliate and instead forgive someone, in recognition of the rainbow of grace that we live under. That would certainly be giving up something of value for something even better. Hanging up our own weapons would be an excellent response to the grace given to us by our self-limiting God.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.