

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2015

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Genesis 7: 11-24 (Read chapters 7,8,9 for the whole story)

Mark 1: 9-13

“Noah and the Temptations”

The story of the flood is, according to a documentary recently aired on the BBC (Joanna Lumley - The search for Noah's Ark), a very old story that is found in an area that reaches from the Mediterranean basin to Bangladesh in the East, parts of Africa to the south, England to the west and Scandinavia and Iceland to the north. (Irving Finkel, The Flood before Noah)

It is highly likely, and in fact there is some geological evidence supporting this theory, that long, long ago, perhaps around 3000 or even as far back as 5000 BC, a cataclysmic flood happened. A flood which might have been caused by sudden, violent climate change due to an asteroid hit, by the eruption of one of the volcanic islands in the Mediterranean (Thera or Santorini), or by a king tide combined with adverse weather conditions in the Mesopotamian valley, or even a tsunami between India and the Arabian Peninsula.

It's hard to say, and it is a long time ago, but it is likely that something happened, at some time, that could have brought a whole civilisation to its knees and would have felt, for those who were caught up in it, as if the whole world had come to an end. It is also likely that a story, or stories of miraculous survivals of this flood, entered human history at that point, or soon after.

If the story is indeed, as some scholars believe, more than 7000 years old, it means that with us still reading it and telling it to our children and grandchildren, this story has been with us for more than 200 generations. Right now, the story is told (with some minor variations) in Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Hindu contexts all over the world, and is found in Nordic, Celtic, Baltic and African mythology as well. In the process, it has become more than a story, more than history; it has become myth, an archetypal story that is part of our general, world-wide, human make-up.

So, it is likely that the story arose from a real-life situation, and is, in that sense, historical. Generated in a trauma so severe that it kept resonating for hundreds and thousands of years after the event. Generated by people trying to make sense of the world again, recovering confidence and trust, recovering hope and a positive outlook for the future.

It is likely, in other words, that the story started as a response to collective post-traumatic stress. And that may be one of the reasons why it, after the initial trauma had been all but forgotten, still keeps resonating with people around the world, and remains an archetypal story that continues to play a role in many cultural, religious and even secular settings today.

Because we as people never cease to experience massive trauma. Floods, fire, war, famine, disease, the impact of meteorites, climate change, calamities that claim massive amounts of lives and can turn civilisations upside down and mighty empires to dust are, and always have been, part of life for as long as there have been people around, and probably even before humans became human. Although we often kid ourselves into thinking otherwise, our existence is fragile, the balance of the created world is fragile. Things happen, and we are, want it or not, always under threat.

And that's how this story, the story of Noah and the flood, probably became part of our make-up as humans, of the baggage that we carry, because it is not (only) a story about something that happened 7000

years ago. It is a story about what happens now, and has been happening forever, and will keep happening long after we've died, and even after our children and children's children are no longer around.

People in the Pacific, in fact, can tell you, from first-hand experience, that it is happening again, as can people in Bangladesh, who struggle with rising floodwaters in the delta of the Indus, as well as people in the Netherlands who have been raising the barriers between them and the waters in the delta they live in, higher and higher. Water levels are rising, in the Ocean, in rivers, in seas, and people are experiencing the impact of that, here and now. With some, like Noah, packing everything they have and moving someplace else with their livestock, not knowing if they'll ever be able to return to where they came from. Climate change, erosion, changing weather patterns, irresponsible building in flood plains, the re-routing and re-channelling of rivers, with little idea about the impact that might have up or down stream. Fracking, extraction of gas, oil and coal may also be increasing the risk of earthquakes and tsunamis. It all adds up....

But even without all of that: Our world, the earth, is a precarious place to be, and we know it. And we all try to live with the ambiguities and insecurities in our own way. Some ignore it completely, or deny it; some create a false sense of control; some become anxious or depressed about it; some catastrophise it; some feel that they, at the very least, should try whatever they can to limit the danger, to diminish the risk, to build ever better and stronger safeguards and throw up ever higher barriers to keep them safe.

The trouble is, we will never be safe, and there is no other option than to live with the insecurities and ambiguities of life. With the overwhelming feeling that it is just around the corner, threatening everything that is precious and dear to us. Life can change in minutes and we all know it!

But usually, it doesn't. At least not for us, here and now, in North Balwyn, we, at least most of the time, thank God, are mostly alright. We don't have the experience that some asylum seekers come to our shores with, who experience living on the edge day after day. We don't have the experience of seeing the water creep up on the shore right behind the homes we and our parents and grandparents before us have lived in, wondering when we will have to leave it all behind. We don't have the experience of seeing hundreds die of ebola, in mortar attacks, from disease. We are, according to human standards, relatively safe.

Except when we are not.

And, we get as anxious, as worried, as scared as anybody else on the planet around us. And when it hits us, when our lives are flooded with grief, with pain, with trauma, it doesn't really matter that there are millions of others suffering the same pain, the same trauma, the same grief, or even worse. We feel it, and we feel its pull to overwhelm us, and our reflexes kick in, and we try to save what we can, while we can. We try to stem the tide, or ride out the storm with whatever we have at our disposal. Survival, for all of us, is hardwired into our brains and bodies, no matter where we live, no matter what our background is.

And after the flood is gone, or the flames are doused, after the cyclone has raged itself out, after the car crash, after the chemo, or the operation, after we have made that very difficult move out of home into care, we'll tell the story and make it sound better than it really was. To comfort ourselves, to convince ourselves it wasn't so bad after all, that we could do it again if we needed to, to give ourselves hope, to regain our confidence in life, that we'll be alright, that we weren't as completely out of control as we, for a moment, may have thought we were.

We convince ourselves that it is unlikely the same thing will happen again, that we are safe, and we look for signs that confirm that. And we talk ourselves around into believing it. And we help each other, building and maintaining a barrier between us and the overwhelm, between us and the troubled waters that we are afraid may devour us if they rose to a level above what we can manage.

Which is profoundly human and a very sensible way of dealing with these things.

Some say that religion was invented for that purpose. To give us a sense of security, to kid ourselves into believing that if we are not in control, at least someone else is, somewhere. Be it God, or fate, or “meant to be”. We end the story of Noah with the story of the rainbow and God’s promise that this will never happen again, because we need to reassure ourselves that we’ll be alright, that someone else is taking care of it, even if we can’t.

I personally believe there is probably an element of truth in that. Life is very precarious, and it is difficult to keep our equilibrium, to keep trust, hope and confidence alive even when the difficulties of life may be overwhelming us. And we are, as people, good at adjusting to difficult realities by changing the story to suit our needs.

But I also believe there is more. And if that is projection, or wishful thinking, I have to say I don’t really care. Because it helps me to survive, and more than survive. It gives me a positive attitude to life, it gives me hope. It curbs the feelings of anxiety and depression that may be lying in wait if I let myself be pulled down and overwhelmed by it all.

That story of Noah has been told for 7000 years now, and it looks like it will be told for another little while yet. Not only because the experience of the flood, the experience of trauma and overwhelm is familiar to all of us in one way or another, at some time in our lives, but because the experience of telling and sharing the story and rediscovering confidence and trust, resilience and hope, healing and wholeness is also familiar to us.

Call it God, or call it a positive core of resilience and hope, as hard wired as the anxiety and insecurity is into the very fabric of our existence, the will and the skill to survive, to recover, to find healing and wholeness, to rediscover hope and trust and confidence, is hard wired into us as well.

The belief, the faith, the conviction that whatever calamity we experience will never hit us again in that same way is something that comes natural to us. And to find the signs, be it a rainbow or otherwise that convince us, that focus us on the positive, is also hard wired into us. A divine prerogative we have as humans. To know, to be conscious of what ails us, to be able to think ahead, worry about the future, while remembering the past, is uniquely and exclusively human, as far as we know. As is hope and the ability to consciously change our perspective from negative to positive.

Animals don’t tell each other stories about what happened once, or offer tools for recovery for generations to come while telling it. Only we do that. With the story of Noah carrying millions of people over thousands of years through flood and famine, giving them hope, telling them that whatever it is that may be flooding them, that may be overwhelming them at a particular time, will, eventually, cease. That the sun will come out again, that somehow life will go on, that there will be a future, even if it doesn’t look like it now. That somehow, something powerful holds life together, even against the odds.

Stories, Noah’s and others, telling us, sharing the archetypal human wisdom, that righteousness pays, that resisting temptation, that living a good and positive life, will bring God down from heaven to offer help and support, while evil, greed and injustice will, in the end, not pay. Even if it may seem so for a while.

Stories, Noah’s and others, and especially the story of the man of Nazareth, telling us that in between everything that may be flooding us, even when troubles cover our earth and we are at sea as to what to do about it or how to help, that embracing justice and living according to the high ethical standards of divine love and compassion, will make a difference and be stronger, in the end, than death itself.

That even where the storms of life may be battering us, we may look at the rainbow and hold on to the belief that comforted and helped millions of others before us. That there is, and will always be, an end to pain, an end to grief, an end to whatever it is that threatens to overwhelm us. That the sun will come out again, watery at first perhaps, with us a bit wobbly on our feet. And that the tomb we found our hopes

buried in, will open and that there will be new life, and a new world waiting to come to birth in us, through us and by us.
Amen.