

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 26 FEBRUARY 2012

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Genesis 7: 11-16, 8:1-5, 9:8-17; Psalm 46; Mark 1: 9-15

“Noah and the Ark”

As I reflected on the lectionary for this Sunday and read and reread the story of Noah, my thoughts went back to the afternoon of the 11th of March 2011 when I settled down on the sofa with a cup of tea and switched on the television for a quick look at the news, totally unprepared for what I would see rolling across my screen, live and unedited.

Some of the images I never saw again, I assume because the news was edited and the most shocking parts taken out as the day proceeded.

At that moment though as I watched in horror and fascination I was witness to one of the worst natural disasters the world has seen. Japan was hit by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake that triggered a deadly 7 meter tsunami in the country's north. As you all will recall, the giant waves deluged cities and rural areas alike, sweeping away cars, homes, buildings, a train, and boats, leaving a path of death and devastation in its wake. The earthquake—the largest in Japan's history—struck about 230 miles northeast of Tokyo. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued warnings for Russia, Taiwan, Hawaii, Indonesia, the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the west coasts the U.S., Mexico, Central America, and South America. According to the official toll, the disasters left 15,839 dead and 3,647 missing.

It all happened in a matter of minutes.

I'll never forget that afternoon, or the horror of watching others die while I was safe, ready to sip my cup of afternoon tea and unable to do or change anything to the events that were unfolding in front of my eyes. The devastation, the futile attempts of people to outrun the water, the cars swept away like dinky toys, whole houses set adrift on the tide of death.

With those images other images surfaced as well. Images that woke me up in a sweaty panic last Wednesday morning, after I'd started the preparation for the service this Sunday last Tuesday. I was back in January 1995 when the part of the Netherlands where we were living was threatened by flooding. I have talked about this before in January last year, and I hope you'll bear with me as I share that experience with you again.

In February 1995 large areas of the Low Countries were deluged with water, and floods threatened many major towns. On 31 January 1995, at Lobith, where the Rhine enters the Netherlands from Germany, the level had risen to 13.48 metres above sea level. Thanks to a well organised evacuation of some 250.000 people and the shoring up of dikes a major disaster was avoided, while large tracts of cities were submerged between 30 January and 1 February 1995. On 2 February 1995 there were signs that the dykes around the River Waal were crumbling. We lived a hundred meters or so from the Waal, one of the two Dutch arms of the Rhine, and when I walked the dog on the afternoon of the 30th of January not only was the river several miles wide and looking more like the Amazon or the Mississippi than a continental European river, the water was starting to flow over the top of the dike. As I stood on top of the dike and looked down on the roof of our house a fistful of fear settled in my tummy. This was not looking good. I'd seen high water levels before, but this was extreme.

I'd grown up with the stories of another flood, taking place 42 years before, on the night of the 31st of January 1953. That flood occurred when a combination of a high [spring tide](#) and a severe [European windstorm](#) caused a [storm tide](#). In combination with a tidal surge of the [North Sea](#) the water level locally exceeded 5.6 metres (18.4 ft) above mean sea level. The flood and waves overwhelmed sea defences and caused extensive [flooding](#). Then the Netherlands, a country that is partly located below mean [sea level](#) and relies heavily on sea defences, recorded 1,836 deaths. Most of these casualties occurred in the southern province of [Zeeland](#) and South Holland where my parents lived at the time and where I grew up. Whole families disappeared in the waves, and as a child I remember how the places where their homes had stood were pointed out to me: Father, mother and eight children drowned here, one miraculous survivor of a family of six over there... I knew all too well what water can do, and the fear that settled in my tummy that afternoon in 1995 was a fear informed by the collective memory of fairly recent traumatic history.

When I got home and switched on the news I was just in time to hear the first call to evacuation go out. We were given six hours to leave the area. By 8pm that night everybody needed to be out.

I rang my husband who was still at work an hour away. He was safe, and he had the car. He hadn't heard anything yet and needed some convincing that this was for real. He then jumped in the car and drove home, against the traffic moving out of the area, getting in just before all incoming traffic was banned to free the roads for emergency services and the traffic that was moving out. He reported a huge traffic jam all the way from where we were to safety. There were only two possible exit routes from the bathtub shaped polder we lived in. And there were some 40.000 people that needed to get out. As we stood waiting in that traffic jam, around 7pm, in the dark, I reflected on what I knew from conversations with some of the areas notables. That the dikes were crumbling and we could be under more than 6 meters of water in a matter of minutes. At that moment I wasn't even scared, I just prayed that we would get out and was grateful we were all together.

We moved in with my parents, others moved in with friends or empty cabins made available around the country. It was the time when mobile phones were still a rarity, but somehow, in the next couple of days, we found out where most of the others had ended up. I learned the nursing home had moved with all 40 inhabitants safe on higher ground. All cattle had made it out too, one of my elders who was a farmer loading cattle till 4am in the morning. They were now all sharing feeding troughs with cows 100 kilometers away.

We kept the news on all day, every day, as we anxiously watched and waited for what would happen next.

After two weeks the water receded and we were allowed back. Nothing had happened to our house and our furniture wasn't even wet. Only the freezer had defrosted. But for us everything had changed. We'd learned to let go. To detach ourselves from the material. We discovered that as long as we were together nothing really mattered that much. Not even the loss of house and home.

The story of Noah, for me, is not about facts, although something factual like the Tsunami in Japan, or the floods in the Netherlands, may have happened so many thousands of years ago and be lying at the root of this myth.

There are theories galore about a "historical Noah's flood", although there seems to be agreement water covering the whole earth and then repopulating it with people and animals from one "set" would be scientifically impossible.

Calling it the "Noah's Flood Hypothesis," geologists theorized that water from melting [ice caps](#) could have overwhelmed the Mediterranean Sea, breaking through the Bosphorus Strait to the Black Sea with Herculean force and flooding about 100,000 sq kilometers of land [source: [Wilford](#)]. In 2007, other researchers found evidence that a melting ice cap from Greenland boosted global sea levels 1.4 meters between 8740 B.C. and 8160 B.C., causing people to migrate toward Europe to escape flooding in the same region [source: [Turney and Brown](#)]. But many marine geologists remain unconvinced of this theory, pointing to their own evidence of a more gradual Black Sea growth around 10,000 B.C. to 9,000 B.C. [source: [Alsu et al.](#)]. Others think a massive volcanic eruption 4500 years ago may have caused a Tsunami that caused a flood that covered a lot of landmass in the Mediterranean. That there are other myths, like the Gilgamesh epic, talking about a giant flood that originated around the Mediterranean as well, seen by some as proof Noah's story has to be true. Not only the Bible talks about it they'll say, others have preserved the story in their history and culture too.

There are similar stories of floods in other cultures, too far away from the Mediterranean basin for them to be connected to a flood that may or may not be at the root of the Noah story. Unless one does not accept that it would be scientifically impossible for a flood to cover the whole earth that is.

Those stories have different scenarios as to how the world gets recreated and repopulated again. Native Americans for instance tell the story of Wisakedjak, otter, beaver and muskrat. After the earth has been submerged in a terrible flood Wisakedjak knows he can rebuild the earth if only he would have a little bit of the old earth at his disposal. He asks otter to dive and find some for him. Otter dives three times, but can't dive deep enough. Then he asks beaver, and beaver dives three times too, but can't find any old earth either. Finally he asks Muskrat, who, finally, on the third dive, surfaces, half dead, with the tiniest morsel of soil in his paws. From that tiny morsel Wisakedjak rebuilds the earth.

What all these stories have in common is that they are Easter stories. Stories about resurfacing, about rising from the ashes, coming back from devastation, rebuilding, about renewal and the promise of a power that is stronger than anything that could ever threaten our existence able to bring us back from the brink of death.

The heraldic motto of the Netherlands is "*Luctor et Emergo*", I struggle and emerge, a motto that is an experience that lies at the heart of our national identity shaped by the collective experience of flood and re-emergence as it is. An experience, or the fear thereof, that, in one way or another, will be part of most people's life.

These stories are "every man, woman and child" stories, metaphors of experiences we are all familiar with, either because we have lived through them or because they confront us with our fear of something that might happen to us. Flood or fire or something else that is able to wipe out our existence.

Deep down we all know how vulnerable and fragile we are, and we need these stories to tell us that however much that may be true, there is another, deeper truth that comes to us over centuries of shared human experience: That God does not leave us forever, no matter how high or overwhelming the forces of evil and destruction may tower over us. That as we wait, pray and trust, God is already working on something new, even where it may feel we are lost in an ocean of sadness and suffering.

Interestingly the word for Ark used in the Hebrew is the same as the word for coffin. So the imagery is not firstly of a boat but of a coffin, full of people and animals adrift on the tide of death. It becomes a lifeboat only when it runs aground on a mountain peak and the dove Noah sends out

returns, after several tries, with the first signs of new life in its beak. After the deluge, after chaos has taken everything, a new creation starts where all seemed to be lost.

Have you ever paused to consider how important the sending out of that dove is to the story? What would have happened if Noah had not found the courage to open the hatch and trust there could still be a future ahead for him and his family? That the coffin he was in could turn out to be a life boat? That he not only trusted and obeyed God when building the ark, but perhaps even more so when he opened that hatch and waited for the dove to return?

It struck me that, as much as this may apply to our individual lives, it may also apply to us, as North Balwyn Uniting Church, or even as Church in general. That after chaos or devastation has struck, it is essential we find the courage to open the hatch and let the dove out. To let the clean fresh air in after the pain of loss and see if the Spirit will return with new, fresh life in its beak. To allow for the possibility of new life, of recreation, of re-emergence from the depths. Leave the safe confines of what will only prove to be a lifeboat if we are courageous enough to accept that the old has died, and needs to be buried, for the new to be able to flourish.

To trust that as we let go there will be other and different experiences on the other side, in God's presence. That even where we may have to let go, God will not.
Amen.