**Sermon for Lent 1 The Covenant with Creation 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, 10and 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.11I 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.’ 12God 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: 13I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15I 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. 16When 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.’ 17God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

**Sermon**

The early chapters of Genesis have prompted all kinds of controversy over the years – especially with regard to how much of the text can or should be treated as factual history. One way of understanding the text (whether you think it is ‘factual’ or not) is to see it as a series of answers to questions. We just have to work out what the question is!

Genesis chapter 1 concludes with a verse that makes it sound like an explanation for taking a Sabbath day off. God did, so we should. Genesis 2 seems to be an explanation for human relationships. Gen 2:24 “for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and the two shall become one flesh.” Even the famous story of Adam and Eve in chapter 3 ends with a suggestion that human life is limited and hard – both labour in the field and labour in childbirth – because of the alienation of humans from God by their rebellion.

The first murder follows, and then a rather strange section where seemingly angelic beings indulge in relationships with human women “daughters of men”. Then we get to the story of the flood, which describes the destruction of all that has gone before. Water covers the whole earth; the only survivors being the occupants of Noah’s ark.

The flood story as history raises many questions. For example:

* If we take it literally, where did all that water come from, and where did it go?
* There is a moral problem. God promises not to do it again, even though history is full of terrible evils. Why did he do it at all? Is God inconsistent?
* Less seriously, we might want to ask how all the people and species not accessible to Noah managed to survive without an ark. How did kangaroos make it?

What this points to is that, again, the primary purpose of the story is to teach us about God, using events that were familiar (the great rivers of the Middle East flooding) and even mirroring flood stories from other cultures.

*But what does it teach?*

I wonder if you ever think “What if…?”

Some people ask that after an event. What if I had stepped off the curb, or gone somewhere on a particular evening. A friend of mine was in one of the Birmingham pubs that were bombed in the 70s the night before the bombs went off. He often went after work. What if?

Sometimes people as it of their own lives – what if I had taken that job, gone to University, married that other person, etc. It can actually become quite destructive if some thoughts take root.

And there has been some interesting “alternative history” written over the years using this idea. Imagine a world where the Saxons won the Battle of Hastings, or America stayed part of the British Empire, or Archduke Ferdinand didn’t get shot in Sarajevo and no First World War.

To me, the chapters of Genesis that follow Adam and Eve read like a kind of “what if?” world. It’s as if someone asked why we need to acknowledge God and worship him, and can we trust the world is secure.

Genesis 4,5 and the start of 6 describe a crisis leading to a flood. The ancients believed there was water beneath the ground and above the sky, and our world was safeguarded by a kind of dome. These protections are lifted to cause the flood – water comes up, and comes in (Genesis 7:11). It takes the world back to the start of Genesis with water covering everything in chaos. Chapter 9 is then a kind of reset to a world much more like the one we know. God tells people to go forth and multiply – echoing chapter 1 - this time permitted to eat meat (but not blood) with the value of all life emphasized.

As we heard, God then makes a covenant. Unlike the later ones with Abraham and Moses, there are no rituals or sets of laws, but this one is with all humanity and all creatures. God promises a security and stability for creation and guarantees it with a rainbow (the original language says a bow of war). God says there will never be another flood – in other words the world will never again revert to the watery chaos seen before creation in Genesis 1. This is not conditional on anything on the part of humanity or any creature – it is the permanent state of affairs.

Genesis has already shown us the alternative “what if” version of reality, but this is what is the case, and what will remain his promise.

Two things strike me from this:

1. It is ultimately grace on God’s part. No-one has earned this protection and promise from God – it is entirely his initiative. Sometimes we can think of our relationship with God as conditional on doing the right thing, saying the right prayers or conducting the right rituals, but here it is without strings. We live in an era where the predictability of the universe is guaranteed by a consistent undertaking by God himself.
2. The covenant is with all creation. And this is what I want to leave us with today. We usually think of covenants in the Bible as referring to the people of Israel, or later with all people through what Jesus has done for us. But here it is with all creatures. That gives a value to every living thing, regardless of whether it is capable of being aware of that or not. There are lots of arguments for being ‘green’, but surely this is one of the most powerful. God has given his creation value – not just humanity – and we should act in a way that respects that God-given status.

So we have an ancient text, containing an even more ancient story, but with a climate crisis upon us, the message is as modern and as relevant now as it ever has been.

Almighty God,

whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,

and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:

give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;

and, as you know our weakness,

so may we know your power to save;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**