

Safe & Sound, Warm & Dry

Sermon for Sunday 21st February 2021 - Cashmere Presbyterian Church

Preacher: Hamish Galloway

Text: Genesis 9:8-15

Mark 1: 9-11

1 Peter 3:19b-22

Introduction

Last weekend we were on Stewart Island, the first day we were there it was pouring with rain, rain that was being driven almost horizontal by a cold southerly wind! We took refuge in the Stewart Island Pub, the South Sea Hotel. In that place we were safe and sound, warm and dry. The hotel was for us a kind of ark in the storm. For Noah and his family the ark was what kept them safe and sound, warm and dry in the most horrendous of rainy periods to strike and flood that planet. In the reading today from 1 Peter 3, we hear that the ark prefigures baptism. These two things are related and analogous. And so we have this thread through the lectionary readings today, first from Genesis 9 the story of the flood and ark, then from Mark's gospel a baptism, Jesus, followed by Peter indicating those two stories are related – that Noah's story prefigures or is a type of baptism.

This idea fascinated certain church fathers, particularly Augustine and Ambrose from the 4th century. They wrote about the ways the ark is like baptism. I found St Ambrose particularly helpful in this regard, bringing out good insights about baptism through the connections with the flood and ark. He had three main points symbolised by wood, water and dove. To these three I would add a fourth; rainbow.

1. Wood – safe harbour in the storm

Ambrose saw the wood of the ark as prefiguring the wood of the cross. Inside that wooden ark, Noah, his family and those animals were saved from the flood. It was the only safe place to be.

So, too, the wooden cross of Jesus is the only means by which we in the human family can be saved from the consequences of sin which are death! Sin is not a popular word these days, probably tainted by some judgemental hell fire preaching of bygone days which left people feeling useless! But I think it is actually about the breakdown of relationships that are designed to allow us to live a good life!

To get the full impact of this, think of the big story of Genesis 1:11.

First, we have the creation of a good universe!

And from the earth God formed a man, the first human, and breathed life into his nostrils! The precious gift of life! The Hebrews have a word for God, Yahweh. Some believe it is a word designed to acknowledge our creator with each breath '*Yah Weh*', in and out.

And the man was placed in a beautiful garden; Eden, paradise. And wonderful was created with his innate ability to appreciate that beauty.

And the man was given companionship, with nature, with God, and especially with the woman formed from his own rib.

This picture is filled with goodness:-

Life

Beauty

Companionship

It is good!

Yet quickly follows a chain of human sinfulness triggered by the prideful disobedience of Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit, then the killing of Abel.... We see life taken, beauty distorted and companionship in destructive conflict.

This was not good! In fact it got so bad prior to the flood that

‘the Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.’ (Genesis 6:5)

This sin, breakdown of key loving relationships, assails us like a deluge of water threatening to sweep us away to destruction, the only thing to do as we are swept away is to grab a hold of that old wooden cross and hang on for dear life. In fact, in 2015 a woman named Clara Gantt was on her way to church in a small Wisconsin town when a flash flood swept her away. She survived by clinging to a cross on a tomb in the church cemetery! As the great hymn says: ‘I will cling to the old rugged cross.’

Paul had a repetitive saying that was basically this, the safest place for any human being is to be ‘in Christ’. In Romans 6 it talks about this in terms of being ‘in Christ’ as being also in his death on the cross, so that we might also be in his rising from the dead.

“all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too may live a new life.” (Romans 6:3-4)

But how is this a safe harbour?

2. Water – sign of unconditional love

Water has a big part to play in both the ark story and baptism. And the water in Noah’s story helps bring out the real meaning of the water in baptism, dispelling an unhelpful misinterpretation of the meaning of the water. The misinterpretation is that the water of baptism represents the washing away of sins. The 1 Peter 3 passage specifically dispels this idea when it says the water of baptism was not about ‘the washing away of physical dirt.’ That idea of baptism fitted with the repetitive, ritual baptism of contemporary Jewish culture and taken up by John the Baptist. As people continued to sin, they continued to need re-baptism. On the contrary, the death of Jesus on the cross *and* baptism of Christ deals with sin ‘once and for all’ (Hebrews 7:27, 10:12)¹

So where does the water come in if not for representing the washing of sin away? The Noah story really helps us understand this. In that story the flood washes away sin and evil, sin and all its destructive ways lie buried under the water!

It is that wicked, broken, sinful world that lies buried by the flood waters, gone and dealt with. So too our sins are buried by the waters of baptism. We leave our sins and the

¹ See Hebrews 10:1-18 for the full explanation.

hold that sin has on us buried at the bottom of the baptismal pool! In Romans 6:5-7 Paul talks about baptism as a symbolic drowning.

- We die with Christ, thus we identify with his death for our sins.
- The old sinful self is left in the pool and we rise up freed from sin which lies now at the bottom of the pool lifeless.

“For we know our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.”

Romans 6:6-7

When Martin Luther, the great 16th century reformer first dawned on this truth, he is reported to say something like this of his baptism; “then drown me, for I want the old Adam, afflicted by sin, completely dead!”

Although the 20th century theologian Karl Barth did respond by saying “Baptism is supposed to have drowned the old Adam, but it turns out the rascal can swim!”

Of course he speaks of the ongoing battle all Christians have with avoiding sin. But the power is this, once baptised sin has no hold on me. That hold lies buried in the pool!

3. **The Dove and the Olive Branch** – peace, shalom, new beginnings

This represents the peace the Holy Spirit brings. First, the olive branch represents new territory: in the Genesis story it is the peace of a new beginning, a fresh start on the land. In our baptism it represents also the peace of a new beginning, a fresh start no longer dogged and broken by sin.

As Paul puts it:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here.”

And the dove in Jesus’ baptism represents the Holy Spirit, bearer of a deep peace with God because our relationship is no longer dogged and broken by sin.

4. **The Rainbow – a guarantee**

The rainbow is a sign of a covenant between God and humans, a promise never to flood the earth like this again! This foreshadows a new covenant, contract, God makes with us through the death of Christ – the new covenant sealed with his blood, with its promise of grace and mercy, forgiveness and wholeness, love and life!

And *that* is good!