

Pentecost III (A)  
*Genesis 6.9-22;8.13-22/Romans 1.16-25/Matthew 7.21-29*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
1 June 2008

After the Flood

~Paul H. Friesen~

When my older daughter was about the age of my younger daughter, I started telling her a story called 'The Dragons of Kearney Lake'. I still haven't finished it.

And that's because the story has turned into an Epic with many tales about the Dragons of that lake, all of which can only be told while the story teller and her Dad are passing along the shores of Kearney Lake itself.

My older daughter doesn't ask for the stories any more but her younger sister now does. Unfortunately the storyteller usually forgets to prepare the next story in advance. And the rule is that he must tell it as soon as that girl can see the water of the lake. So the storyteller almost always 'flies by the seat of his pants', as they say.

I think most of the tales are worth forgetting, and I have forgotten quite a few of them myself. But one thing I will never forget is that my daughters know when I'm buying time to figure out the next turn of the plot. When I used to throw in too much description, my older daughter would call out 'Tell the story!' My younger daughter, it turns out, has no more mercy than her sister.

The problem is that these are Eastern dragons, Asian dragons, who somehow ended up in Canada.

And Eastern dragon are heroes, mighty kings—not nasty western dragons to be slain by a knight in shining armour. And Eastern dragons must live forever.

So now you can see my problem. I simply can't finish off the Dragons of Kearney Lake. The story must go on with lots of action—evil must be continuously defeated and the good guys must win victories. When it came to the magical land of Narnia, it took even C.S. Lewis seven books to get to *The Last Battle*.

I'm sure we've all felt the urge to cry out to God in the midst of the Epic of our life—or any human drama in sight—and say: 'Tell the story' and 'Let's see the good guys win!!' and 'Enough already with the details!!'

And it's true that we celebrate the story of creation winning out over chaos, and the story of the resurrection winning out over death. But living in the midst of the story—or many stories at once—is confusing, and messy, and actually very, very human.

This is exactly what we are asked to think about today by our Scriptures—life in the midst of unfinished stories. We know the beginning. We know about the end. But we're stuck in the middle.

This came home to me this week as in spare moments I read through the spiritual autobiography of a friend, covering many years. In fact, when any of us looks back on the stories of our lives, even long after we're through a particular episode, we realize how 'in the middle of everything' it was: how tangled up it was with all kinds of things that neither begun nor ended when they were supposed to.

And that may be our situation this morning. *We might have felt how 'unfinished', how incomplete our life was as we set off for worship.* This is true regardless of how young or old we are.

*But we can know we are in God's hands, even when we feel helpless, even when we feel the tangled threads of our lives can't be pulled together. We can confess that our lives have meaning, and we can live as if our lives—and the whole of human history—is being woven together by God.*

We are allowed glimpses every now and then of how things are connected; about the welcome and unwelcome consequences of our decisions and the impact of the decisions of others upon us; about the long term results of all these things as we grow older. *Yet to learn to live in faith is a greater thing.*

Almost everybody has heard the story of the Great Flood told in the Scriptures, parts of which we have just heard.

In fact, the story was told not only by our ancient Hebrew ancestors, but told in other ancient cultures as well—for instance, in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This has prompted scholarly debates about which story is the oldest. And there have been fights amongst Christians about how literally the biblical story of Noah should be understood.

On the other hand Christians and Jews face criticisms directed at their God—was he no more than an angry, murderous deity they shared with pagans?

We could actually spend some time connecting our lesson from the first chapter of *Romans* to the story from *Genesis*. And we should explore, with mind and heart, the biblical connection between what we call God's

judgement, and the natural consequences of human behaviour— we should perhaps think about ‘global warming’, for instance, in this way.

We won’t solve any of these debates this morning. We shouldn’t discourage the debates, of course. But right now we should think about what happens ‘after the flood’.<sup>1</sup>

How do we live after one great tragedy or difficult stretch of life, without any assurance of what will happen next? What is the meaning of this present moment when we must make decisions and take on responsibilities without knowing the end of the whole story of our life—or even this chapter?

*First, the present moment comes loaded with God’s grace.* It would have been easy for Noah to ignore this given the tragedy he saw coming. But he heard God’s voice, and he responded to God’s grace.

After God has warned Noah that the ‘earth was filled with violence’ and that the violence was about to bring down the world he knew, he instructed Noah: ‘I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark.’ This was the divine promise that whatever happened God would not break his promise to preserve Noah and his family, and so preserve humanity.

And God gave Noah a blessing and role to take on. Just as Adam had not been made without Eve, and just as Adam had given names to all God’s creatures, so Noah and his family were to preserve humanity.

They were to preserve God’s image, male and female, and they were to be the means of preserving creation around them: ‘you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.’

In other words, Noah’s little community was to be ready to re-enact the story of creation. They were to be partners, actors, in the re-creation of God’s world. They weren’t to lie limp in the hands of a puppet-master who told the story by manipulating them. So they did what God asked: ‘Take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.’

They were offered no guarantee that the plot of their own story would turn out as it ought to, but they lived as those who would participate in what

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of a pop song I heard on the radio this week, and which I wish could find so I could listen to it again.

happened after the flood. They lived this way because of God's promise, God's covenant of grace, God's promise to never forsake them.

*The present moment comes loaded with God's grace. But Noah's family heard God's voice, and responded to God's grace.*

And there is a second great truth about life 'in the middle of everything else.' *Through us God will bless others, after the flood and before what ever else might happen.*

Here is what happened at the end of this episode: 'God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons' wives with you. "Bring out with you every living thing that is with you...so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth."...And the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of every human heart is evil from youth...As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest...shall not cease.'"

Hang on a second. God knows that we shall do no better as a human race, and yet God is to bless the world through us?

That's right. That is how this episode ends. It does not end with the promise that God will destroy us if we don't do better than our ancestors. It ends with a promise that God will never forsake humanity, and that we are the means of the world's re-creation, its fruitfulness, after disaster and before what happens next.

If you read the Bible, and not just the inspirational bits, you know what happens next. Back on dry land, Noah gets drunk with unfortunate consequences. Others get drunk. Violence, illicit sex, murder, war follow, over the centuries. It's a repeated theme. And yet, Noah's response to God's faithfulness mattered. And our response to God's grace, most especially in Jesus Christ matters, regardless of what has happened, and what awaits us.

There are cheaper versions of life to buy—some of them, well-meaning, some of them Christian: stories of never-ending triumphs of a certain kind, stories that make anything less seem embarrassing and un-spiritual.

Well, we are taught to say by Scripture, even at funerals: 'Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' And we have said it and will say it again in different ways in our worship. But we don't say it as those who are in charge of the world. We say it as those entrusted with God's grace, to bring blessing to those around us—regardless of what happens to us and may yet happen, regardless of whether it was our fault or someone else's fault.

We don't know the plot of our whole life, though we are granted glimpses of the meaning of some of the stories in them. We can confess, and we can come to know two things:

*The present moment comes loaded with God's grace. And: Through us God will bless others, after the flood and before what ever else might happen.*

Let's think about this during this worship, and when we enter into parish life and parish planning, and when we assess the state of our lives, or our family history, or the world.

In the end, God will gather up all the threads. We live in the middle of God's great story.

We can live with joy if we open ourselves to the grace with which God loads the present. We can find meaning if we know that the grace God gives us is meant to be given away—whatever form that grace takes.

This is what God is hoping for from us. God hopes that we will hear his voice as Noah did, in spite of everything else before, and everything that followed...

Let's participate in God's call to be fruitful, to create hope for those around us. Amen.