

FLOODS HAPPEN



Genesis 9:8 "God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after 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.'"

Recently I watched a homemade video of the tsunami that struck Japan in 2011, and I found the recording so riveting that I couldn't turn away from it. Recorded in a small town upriver from the ocean itself, the video at first shows a placid scene

of small boats resting alongside the river's shore, birds pecking at the water, and people casually crossing bridges and taking walks. The tsunami changed all of this over the next 25 minutes. The water began to ripple at first, then to rise and then to surge, sweeping down the river and then across the banks, into streets and yards. People watched with interest at the beginning, and then moved to upper apartment floors in a party-like atmosphere at first as the waters kept rising. Soon the crowds were shouting in dismay and horror as the world below them filled with water and debris and floating cars and parts of wooden structures torn from their foundations and smashed like matchsticks against the apartment building, as the raging waters rose. The large trees that lined the pleasant avenue along the river tumbled like a house of cards before the waves of water. Soon there were small electrical explosions, and then fires began to break out across the town, and the dark dirty water below them was illuminated by a strange, orange-lit sky. It was shocking in the end, as the quiet afternoon scene turned into a nightmare of destruction.

A great flood struck the Mediterranean world in ancient times. The story of Noah as told in Genesis is echoed in accounts of other traditions, like the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. In the science of those days, the people saw a divine hand at work in such things. They wondered why God was doing what he

was doing. Punishing humanity for its sins was the answer of Genesis. Ushering in the last day was Jesus' explanation in Matthew's Gospel. St. Paul saw the story of Noah's salvation as a prefigurement of our own salvation through the waters of Baptism. Regardless, people simply weren't prepared for the great flood's destruction, they simply weren't prepared for what was happening all around them. They were going about their daily lives even as the flood surged and destroyed and swept them all away.

Such sudden surges of destruction aren't really unfamiliar to any of us. We have all experienced them at one time or another, in little and sometimes in bigger ways. We lose a job, and suddenly our normal life vanishes before our eyes. We get a frightening medical report, and unexpectedly the future looks darker, and the present moment feels very different indeed. Planes crash into buildings, bombs explode, fire ravages a home, tornadoes appear, flood waters rise, cancer stirs -- and in a moment everything is changed for us.

And we who thought we had control of our lives, discover that forces stronger than our own are at work in the world around us. Forces like Mother Nature, climate change and human depravity, and bad luck, coincidence, unforeseen consequences, etc. Such forces often surge into our lives quite suddenly, and

our placid little riverbanks cannot contain the flood that follows.

In response to this, we humans try to control things. We try to build sturdier riverbanks, higher sea walls, and earthquake-proof buildings. We raise up bigger barns to store our wealth, or larger police forces to guard our homes, or mightier armies to safeguard our security. The illusion of control is hard to shake for many of us. But floods still happen. We are not in control. The tsunami in Japan, the megastorm in the Philippines, unusual winter tornadoes in the Midwest, recent flooding in San Diego and Los Angeles, whatever preparations we made before each of these, they were never enough, and we are never completely secure. Floods still happen.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus said, 'For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. What Jesus counseled to his disciples instead was alertness. Be prepared, he said, keep watch, stay awake, be ready - these are words of action, but these are not words of control. Jesus knew that we are not in control, however much we like to think so. Emergency responders don't prevent emergencies; they only respond to them.

Loving people don't forestall suffering and dying in the lives of their family and friends; they react to them. Floods still happen.

The Christian community isn't a clever way to make life safe. It isn't a guarantee against disaster. Life is hard for everyone. As the Scriptures note, it rains on the just and the unjust alike. The Christian community is more about our agreeing to work together to control life's inevitable dangers. It is about our banding together to care for one another in the midst of such unavoidable tragedies. Drawing strength and courage from each other, we move toward those in need, not away from them. We respond to their cries for help, and not just count our own blessings. We share the fruits of our labor with those in need around us, not just at Thanksgiving or Christmas, but all year round, whenever there is a need, because that is who we are called to be.

So, remember Jesus' counsel. Be alert. Be prepared, he said, keep watch, stay awake, be ready to respond and care for one another - these are indeed words of action. Because floods will still happen, and we must be at hand to provide help and healing to those afflicted at some unexpected hour. Amen.