
Never Again

Genesis 9.8-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 1, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

There's a story associated with one of the great financial institutions on Wall Street. One Friday evening a couple of months back, the story goes, letters arrived in the mailboxes of 12 members of the executive board of a large and prestigious investment bank. The letters were unsigned, and not on headed notepaper. They were very brief, each comprising just these four words: "They know everything: flee." By Monday morning ten of the 12 board members had left town, and that famous financial giant was looking for new leadership.

"They know everything: flee." Imagine we really could see into the shadows of one another's hearts and read the whole truth that lies lurking there. What a terrifying prospect. We live our lives fuelling fantasies, nursing resentments, and protecting secrets. We're deeply lonely, because we never find anyone who truly understands us; but what keeps us lonely is our terror that somebody may one day stumble upon the truth of who we really are.

In all our anxiety and striving and denial, in all our desperation to hold it together and seem on top of things and hide our failures, we habitually forget one thing: God already *knows* the truth of who we really are. He knows all about our sin and our pathetic attempts to hide that sin in self-righteousness. He sees through our claims that everybody does it, he wryly smiles when we say it's not so bad, he winces when we say no one will notice. God has a fundamental decision to make: is he going to let the sad reality of who we really are determine the way he relates to us – or is he going to see past who we *are* to who he *made* us to be? The Bible suggests God made that choice a very long time ago, in the time before time that Genesis calls the time of Noah.

The early pages of Genesis know the truth of who we really are. Straightaway there's suspicion, anxiety, jealousy, deceit, even murder. We're only six chapters into the Bible, and God has already had it with his creation. He sends a flood to destroy the earth's inhabitants. After six solid months of flood, suddenly, the story tells us, "God remembered Noah." And then, after the familiar parts about ravens and doves and twigs and olive branches, we get this extraordinary passage we've just read together today. God says "*Never again* will there be a flood. *Never again* will I destroy the earth. This is the last time. It will *never happen again*."

And straightaway the whole dynamic of the Bible changes. We assume this whole issue is really about God's patience. We take for granted that the tension in the story is really to see how long God can keep his temper before he finally explodes again. But it turns out that isn't where the tension in the story lies. God never does lose his temper. He never does break his promise. Instead the tension is to see how God is going to resolve the problem of human sin given that he's never again going to destroy the earth.

Let's pause for a moment at this point in the story and hear deep down inside these words of God. We still retain this punitive notion of God, and we still try to hide who we really are from this God, like a teenage boy trying to stuff his box of smokes and arousing magazines under the mattress before his mom comes into his bedroom. But hear what God has to say to each one of us. "I *know* who you really are. I *know* how you've grabbed and hidden and hoarded and betrayed and denied and misused. But I'm not going to let your distorted desire put my love for you out of shape. Don't flatter yourself that your sin can ruin my story. I promised I would never again destroy my people. And I keep my promises. I know you – but I won't destroy you. I'll find a way to love you back to life, even if it takes for ever. And don't worry, I'll outlast you. *My patience is greater than your stubbornness*."

I don't know what you've given up or taken on for Lent but imagine you'd embarked on a 40 day program of never throwing anything away. It's called having a "non-disposable Lent." Two things would happen very quickly. First, you'd need to develop your imagination for what you do with the endless amount of food and packaging we throw away, and I'm not even going to speculate on what that means in the bathroom and how significantly that broadens your notion of compost. And second, you'd quickly be making arrangements not to bring into your home anything you might subsequently waste, because you'll want to cut the problem off at source. Just think: that's exactly what God did the day he put his bow in the clouds at the end of the Noah

story. He said “From now on, I’m never going to throw anything away – not you, not the animals, not the whole earth. From now on I’m going to work out a way of saving the earth from itself, rather than feel I can always fall back on destroying it.” You could call it God having a “non-disposable salvation.”

What an amazing thing to hear God say to us. “I’m not going to throw you away because fundamentally *I don’t throw anything away*. I find a future use for everything I’ve made. Every aspect of your being I’ll use to give life to others, whether you’re happy to join in that process or not. And if you participate in that process you’ll call it life – eternal life even; and if you try to sabotage or somehow poison that process you’ll call it death. I want you to be a part of the way I’m giving you life, but even if you’re having none of it, you can’t finally stop me making you part of the way I give life to the world.”

But we all know how profoundly we resist the ways of God. God flies ahead of us and says “Fly in my slipstream, I’ve made it easy for you.” Half of us are so reckless that we demand to take our own route, flying too close to the sun and doing ridiculous loop the loops to get attention. The other half of us are so timid that we won’t get the plane off the ground for fear of getting it wrong. Even though God has promised he will never destroy us and will always turn our evil into his good, we still make the fundamental mistake. We assume our sin is more real than God’s grace. We assume that finally God will turn out to be as bad as us rather than that God will make us as good as him.

And so finally Noah was not enough. God’s promise was not enough in the face of our mistrust. It needed not just God’s *promise* but God’s *person*. And in the life of Jesus Christ we had it out with God once and for all. Our sin took on God’s grace. Somehow we just couldn’t believe that if we had God around us long enough we wouldn’t succeed in making him as cynical and twisted as we are. In the end we did to God precisely what God in the Noah story said he would never again do to us. We set out to dispose of him. And we thought we’d pulled it off. But the resurrection is like a second bow in the clouds. Christ is the new Noah. The resurrection is God saying “You cannot destroy me. You cannot stop me turning your evil into my good. Your sin will never outlast my grace. You’ll *never again* have any grounds for thinking I mean to dispose of you. I will love you to life, however much it costs me, however long it takes.”

Jesus is the embodiment of God’s words to Noah, “*never again*.” God had promised never again to destroy the earth. But that created a problem. He knew who *we* really were: but how were we to discover who *he* really was? When we insisted on misrepresenting God, misunderstanding him and portraying him as the selfish, jealous, insecure image of ourselves, there was nothing God could do to set us straight other than come himself among us and remove all doubt for ever. Jesus’ coming revealed who God really is. And, sadly, the way we treated Jesus revealed who we really are. *Never again* can we say we don’t know the true character of God. *Never again*. *Never again* can we say we don’t know who we truly are. *Never again*.

Lent is a period of 40 days, recalling the 40 days God sent rain down on Noah. Those 40 days are stretched like a violin string between Noah and Christ. Between the *never again* and the consequence of that *never again*. Between the moment God said “I will *never again* destroy the earth” and the moment God faced the consequence of his commitment never to throw us away. If you go in for a non-disposable Lent, it will be an attempt to enter in to the life of a non-disposable salvation – brought about by a non-disposable God who’s resolved never to throw us away, even if we throw him away.

The danger with Lent is that we turn it into an exercise in appeasing a God that our God in Noah and Jesus has shown himself not to be. If we’re not careful Lent becomes a 40-day period of stuffing incriminating evidence under the mattress, a kind of extended half-hour clean-up before the in-laws come round to supper, jamming unpaid bills into drawers and squeezing unwashed laundry into closets. Lent has to begin not with reordering our lives but with reordering our understanding of God. Our God is the God who said “*Never again*.” “*Never again* will I reject you, destroy you, expose you, humiliate you, even though I know exactly who and what you are. *Never again* should you portray me in your own image. I don’t let your sin determine my picture of *you*, so you shouldn’t allow your sin to dominate your picture of *me*. *Never again*.”

Once we’ve met the non-disposable God, the God who refuses to throw us away, we spend Lent reflecting that we’re disposable people, people who are content to cast aside anyone or anything if they stand in the way of

our comfort, our convenience, our conscience, our contentment. When we make our confessions we see in our rear-view mirror a trail of wreckage of the things, commitments and people we've disposed of in order to secure our immediate well-being. And so we spend the 40 days of Lent repenting of being such a disposable people and striving to resemble the non-disposable God, who in Noah said he would *never again* dispose of us and in Jesus showed he really meant it, even when we tried to dispose of him.

And at the end of Lent we come face to face with Good Friday – the day we tried to dispose of the non-disposable God, the day we tested God's "*never again*" to its absolute limit. But God's "*never again*" held firm that day. Even when we sought to destroy him he kept his promise not to destroy us. And as Lent nears its end and we come close to Good Friday, we gradually find the courage to ask ourselves the most painful and truthful question of all. Would we do it again? Would we make God disposable out of a misguided desire to preserve our own security and well-being? Would we crucify Jesus a second time rather than face the truth about ourselves? Would we?

Of course we would. That's the horror of facing the truth about ourselves, a disposable people cherished by a non-disposable God. And that's the moment when "*never again*" changes, and becomes not just about God but about us. That's the moment when our guilt finally turns to love, when our denial finally turns to repentance. We *would* crucify Jesus a second time. That's the truth. We can't in all honesty say "*Never again*," but the more we realize we can't, the more we realize we long to, more than we long for anything else in the world.

And this is what happens. In our horror at ourselves and our longing and love for this astonishing, cherishing, eternally gracious God, we search the shadowy recesses and corridors of our souls, and recognize the hardness of our hearts, name the sordid and shabby reality of our sin, and fall to our knees, and repent before our endlessly loving savior, and with quavering, fragile, but determined voice say the pleading, earnest, hopeful words of penitence.... "From this moment on I am leaving my life of sin behind and allowing you to make the person you see out of the person I am. I resolve in the power of your Holy Spirit to abandon my disposable ways and reject my deceiving habits. Never again, O Lord. Never again. Never again. Never, never, never again."