

# A God of Weakness?

*A sermon on Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:1-18 & Mark 1:9-15 by Nathan Nettleton, 21 February 2021*

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## Message

God will walk with us in suffering and work redemptively within it, but God is not powerful enough to just remove it.

## Sermon

Within the pages of the Bible there is an ongoing debate over what God is like. Different books of the Bible and their different authors champion various understandings of God and of the way God acts in the world. This should come as no surprise to us, since what ever else the Bible is, it began as a collection of people's reflections on God and on how they perceived God to be interacting with them and with others.

I'm not saying that that's all the Bible is, because quite clearly over a period of centuries the church tossed out those writings which it didn't find to have ongoing power within its life, and so what we have now is a very special collection of writings, but they are still a collection which contain more than one viewpoint about God. You've only got to ask yourself why we've got four gospels instead of one to see that that's true.

There are some issues that come up over and over throughout the Bible – big questions that different writers wrestled with in different ways. One of those questions is about the nature and extent of God's power, and another is more specifically about how God's power is to be understood when so much evil continues to occur in the world. These are questions that are pushed even more into our consciousness during the season of Lent, because the stories we read at this time of year confront us with a God who doesn't simply obliterate evil, but chooses to become a victim of it. We see God the Son either choosing not to exercise power or being simply powerless in the face of evil. And we must ask, "What kind of God is this?"

Today's readings taken together really give us an opportunity to ask some tough questions about God's power. The reading we heard from Genesis was the conclusion of the story of Noah's flood. The writer of this story attributes absolute power to God. God made the flood happen to deal with the problem of evil in the world. God responds to evil by wiping out the evildoers with a mighty act of power. But we may need to question the author's interpretation of God's actions. You see in this part of the story, God is promising that there will never again be a flood that destroys the earth in such a way.

So did God keep this promise? Well, if you believe that floods are caused by God, and you're anxious to defend God's honour you could argue that there has never been another flood like that one, but I bet you'd have trouble saying that out loud recently in Uttarakhand, India, or South Kalimantan, Indonesia. In Uttarakhand two weeks ago, a Himalayan glacier collapsed, sending a torrent of water, rock and dust down a mountain valley. It killed about 170 people, which was nothing compared to a flood in the same area just eight years ago that killed 6000.

In South Kalimantan a few weeks ago, one of the worst floods ever seen in the region hit depths of three metres in some neighbourhoods and displaced tens of thousands of people. I don't think you're going to be able to persuade the people there that God kept his promise on the grounds that there's never been another flood as big as Noah's one. Unless your theology

is good news to people whose houses have just been washed away, then you need to ask whether it is really good news at all.

If we take the image of God's power from this story, and run with it on its own, we have a big problem. God ends up looking like a classic abuser. If all floods and other natural catastrophes are truly "acts of God" then we are left with a God who perpetrates an enormous act of violence on the earth and its people, then in remorse promises never to do it again, but then, as the people of South Kalimantan or even of Carnarvon Western Australia would tell you, does it again and again and again. Ask any social worker – that's the classic behaviour pattern of the violent abuser.

Now we can't escape the fact that there are parts of the Bible, some large parts, that push the view of God as one with absolute power who is the controller of everything that occurs in the world, floods and earthquakes included. That interpretation of God is one that exists within the tradition that we stand in. But it is not the only view in the Bible or in the history of Christian thinking. And I would argue that it is not a view that can go unchallenged in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus the Christ.

If, as the New Testament writers tell us, God is exactly like Jesus, we start to get a very different picture of the relationship of God to power. The story we heard tonight of Jesus alone in the wilderness does not paint a picture of God exercising control over the details of nature. Forty days, alone, feeling lost, hungry, tempted to give up or change track, struggling with questions like whether the way of power can ever be reconciled with the way of love. "Turn this stone into bread."

Even when he emerges from the wilderness and begins his preaching ministry, the menacing shadow of powerlessness and vulnerability, the shadow of the cross, hangs over him right from the start, because as Mark points out, he begins his preaching just after John the baptiser was arrested for doing exactly the same thing. Every time Jesus preaches, everyone knows that the same forces that cut off John in his prime are both capable and likely to rise up and do the same to Jesus at any moment. It's only a matter of time.

Where is the God of power in the face of this pervasive threat of violence and evil? Where is the God who sweeps evil into the abyss with the flood of his holy anger?

Well, perhaps the absence of such a God is actually at the root of the costly challenge we face during this journey of Lent. We are having to choose between two images of God and they're both flawed. We can choose to believe that God has absolute power and is in control of everything that goes on on earth, but if we do then we will have to face the charge that our God is a violent abuser. The people of South Kalimantan and Auschwitz and Tigray will not be forgotten in the question. There was no God of power acting to rescue them, and our theology must answer to their experience.

Of course, for the past year, the experience of deadly disaster has been a lot more widespread than we are accustomed to. We've got off very lightly here in Australia, but the coronavirus pandemic has spread fear, panic and death across almost the entire world. Just like floods, deadly plagues appear often in the Bible, and numerous parts of the Bible attribute them directly to God who allegedly sends them as a punishment for sin.

If you want to believe that, you still have to deal with the question about why God's means of punishing sin are so indiscriminate. Why does it seem to hit the deserving and the undeserving without discrimination? If God has the power to unleash a deadly plague on command, surely God has the power to first immunise the innocent and righteous, or at least to control the targeting more accurately. Can we really hold that God is a god of unlimited power if God is unable to accurately control and target his own power?

Alternatively we can grapple with the possibility of believing in a God who looks a lot more like Jesus: a vulnerable God whose power is limited, a God who experiences powerlessness, a God who cannot respond to evil by just wiping it out with an act of power.

Why God's power is limited is not clear. Maybe there is a moral constraint that prevents God exercising an otherwise powerful strength, that is to say that to intervene with power would violate God's nature as the ultimately loving one and so can't be done. Maybe on the other hand God just doesn't have such power even if he wanted to exercise it. Maybe floods and plagues are natural accidents and God is no more able to change them than we are.

If you choose to believe in the God of powerlessness, it makes no real difference which explanation of God's powerlessness you prefer; they are just speculations, and either way, God does not have the power to intervene in everything to ensure that evil always loses and good always triumphs.

The struggle over the nature of God's power is never simply resolved in the Bible. It continues in the New Testament and our reading from 1st Peter begins with the image of Jesus suffering, and ends with an image of him seated in glory with all other powers made subject to him. And however we resolve such tensions, since God has been revealed to us in Jesus, we have to come to terms somehow with a God who comes to us as a fellow victim of evil and suffering. No simple one sided "God of power and might" image is really available to us any more.

During Lent we have to wrestle with this painful dilemma for some weeks before we arrive at the revelation of how there is still extraordinarily good news in this. As we eventually move from the Friday of crucifixion to the Sunday of resurrection we will discover the powerlessness of evil power. We will see that even when evil and hatred do their worst, they are not capable of entombing forever love and hope. God may not have the power to prevent evil from doing its worst, but evil does not have the power to prevent God's best.

And while there are six weeks ahead of us to explore this further, there are two things I'm really confident in. I know that however challenging this road ahead of us is, we are up to it. With God's grace, we have what it takes to make it through. And I know that when it comes to the moments when we have to back one image of God or the other, for my vote, I'd much sooner entrust myself to a God of suffering and resurrection than to a God who sends floods and earthquakes.