

23rd February, Arnhem-Nijmegen. 2nd before Lent. Year C. – Revd Dorienke de Vries

Readings: Gen 2, Ps 65, Rev 4, Luke 8.22-25

Hymns 33, 114, 201, 174

I am starting with a really bizarre story today. Here we go:

Before there was anything, there was Apsu, god of the sweet water sea and Tiamat, goddess of the salt water sea. They mingled, and so created the next generation of gods; among them mighty Ea and his many brothers. Ea and his brothers were restless; they surged over the waters of the sweet and the salt water seas day and night. Neither Apsu nor Tiamat could get any rest; so Apsu decided to destroy Ea and his brothers. But Ea heard of this plan and struck Apsu down first. Tiamat was furious that her mate was killed. She began producing ferocious monsters to slay Ea and his brothers. Meanwhile, however, Ea and the goddess Damkina had created the great god Marduk. The gods told Marduk of Tiamat's army of demons and dragons, and asked him for help. I will fight for you, promised Marduk, but as a reward, I want to rule the universe on high. The gods agreed, and Marduk rode into battle. The waters of Tiamat swirled together and formed a fearsome dragon. But Marduk let one of his arrows fly, cutting the dragon in half. He raised half of the body to the heavens to form the sky and the other half formed the earth. Then he decided to create a creature that could serve the gods, doing the hard work of looking after the earth. So he created a structure from the bones of the monsters he had slain. Then he formed the flesh around it and breathed life into it. Man took up residence on the earth, while the gods ascended to heaven. Thus the gods were freed from eternal labour.

The end.

This is a short version of the Babylonian creation myth Enuma Elish. A story about a power struggle in a highly dysfunctional divine family at the dawn of time. It aims to explain the world, the how and the why of its existence. The bottom line is that the universe is a dead goddess. And human beings – we – were made from the left-overs of a massacre. A murderous tyrant breathed us to life, and then left us to be the gods' slaves for ever.

It does make sense, doesn't it? Enuma Elish may be an ancient myth, and its language is mythical, but it is not hard to recognize human history and our own world and time. Murder in our very bones from the very beginning. The spirit of a violent god reigning the universe until this very day. Our world looks very much like those raging waters, stirred up by fearsome and pitiless gods. Hear the world leaders talk. Read their tweets. It's Marduk all over again, breathing hatred and violence and lust for power. We see him flexing his muscles, enjoying the chaos and suffering he is causing.

Myths are not fairy tales. Their mythical language convey deep truths. They shape our world view, our morals, our values, our lifestyle. They say something about the world we find ourselves in. This is what Enuma Elish did for the people of God during their time of exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin were forced to live among the very nation that produced this myth and lived by its values. The Babylonian armies had destroyed the temple and the holy city of Jerusalem. It was indeed a violent and cruel nation; their gods had taught them well.

For God's people, exile was a big wake-up call. It wasn't as if they suddenly found themselves in a religious and cultural setting that was completely alien to them. They were familiar with the gods of the ancient Middle-East. They had worshipped them themselves – offering sacrifices to Baal, the Canaanite version of Marduk, prostituting themselves for Asherah and sacrificing their children to please Moloch. So you'd think they'd feel quite at home in Babylon...

But they didn't. Exile was the shock therapy that brought them to their senses. They learned the hard way that the stories we tell and live by can lead to death. And now, finding themselves far from God and far from the promised land, they returned to their own tradition. To their own creation stories, that had been passed on through many generations. They dusted them off, and wrote them down, resisting the stories that defined the world around them. Confronted with the consequences of the stories from hell, they returned to a story of creative love, of light and life and original blessing. And with it they rejected the god that had poisoned them with his breath, that had destroyed their land, their temple, their holy city, their identity, that had captured and enslaved them. In the midst of captivity they returned to their faith in the goodness of God and of creation. Above the raging waters of the world, and of their own misery, they rediscovered the life-giving Spirit of God, bringing order to chaos; creating a world that is good to live in; planting a garden for humans to enjoy in mutual love. Offering friendship and companionship to human beings. It is a story that rekindled hope. It re-awakened the dream of God's good purpose for humankind.

It did so then, and it can do so now. The creation story we have heard today is a story of resistance. It helps us to confront the lies of our own time, and the vicious circle of hate and violence that seems to have the last word.

Our gospel story is also about raging waters, and we usually read it as a metaphor – either of storms in our personal lives, or of the raging tumult of the nations. It is a story that renews our trust in Christ, as it makes clear who is in charge.

The disciples knew raging waters and howling winds. Some of them were experienced fishermen. They were used to work on a lake where the weather was unpredictable and storms could be dangerous. But this time it seems to be too much, even for them. The disciples feel like the mouth of hell is opened wide, about to swallow them. Jewish readers will have recognized the image of water as an image for the chaos and darkness where God is absent. It must have made sense to them – being occupied by a cruel people that worshipped cruel gods.

But in the midst of all this tumult, Jesus is asleep. Resting like a baby in a tossing boat.

It feels like our world today. The raging waters a symbol of the wars between the powerful of this world. They seem to get away with anything. Nobody is able to stop them. The tides are rising. Marduk seems to be in charge, and God seems to be asleep. How many more people will have to drown before he wakes up?

When I read my daily newspaper, I find myself to be someone of very little faith indeed. There are many moments that I would like to shake God, like the disciples did shake Jesus. 'God, wake up! Don't you care that we are perishing?' And I think we should. We should keep crying out to God, we should storm his throne, keep on bang bang banging on heaven's door. What else can we do but intercede for this groaning world, for creation in pain, for human beings trampled underfoot? Now if Marduk were indeed in charge, there would be no point in such prayer, because then the world is as it is supposed to be, and the gods don't care. But we refuse to believe that. And so we cry out to the God of life. The God who told us that he loves us. And we tell our stories. Over and over again: the story of a good creation and friendship between God and humankind; the story of a sea that is calmed by a simple divine word; the story of a Saviour who is in charge and enfolds this whole world in his wounded hands. We may have little faith, but we keep that faith. We cherish it. We hold on to it. We trust that it is this faith, our faith in the stories of hope and beauty and peace, that eventually will overcome the power of evil.

So resist the stories of death. Tell the stories of life and light, and live by them. Be strong in the faith and be at peace: for this man, who commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him – we know who he is, don't we? Amen.