

The Heart of God

Reading from the Old Testament: Genesis 6:5-9, 11-14, 17-19; 8:6-12; 9:8, 12-16

Reading from the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 5:17

“And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.” I guess you could say it was a good year to be a fish. While Noah fretted over building codes and the rumors multiplied, Dory couldn’t wait to tell Nemo, “We’re getting a bigger pool!” It just goes to show that one person’s crisis is another fish’s bonus.

Noah and the ark. It is one of those culturally appropriated stories that transcend the faith community and won’t be bound by the good book. It is nigh impossible to walk through a craft festival or a gift shop without seeing some folk artist’s rendering of an ark highlighted by the craning neck of a giraffe, the majestic mane of the lion, and the cheesy grins of the chimps. I haven’t seen a Steve Carrell inspired Noah action figure, but I’d wager there is one out there.

Midwesterners may remember the childhood treat of eating clam chowder at the boat-shaped Noah’s Ark restaurant, dry-docked near the banks of the Missouri River. And the naming of our eldest son brought a plethora of Noah gifts: toys, children’s books, Christmas ornaments, and

greeting cards starring the bearded boatbuilder and his animal entourage.

Did you know there's a Noah's Ark Waterpark in the Wisconsin Dells and a Noah's Ark pet sitting company in Waxhaw. There are Noah's Ark preschools, Noah's Ark animal shelters, hospitals, veterinary clinics, and how about the Noah's Ark Bar and Grill in Galveston Bay. There's the Noah's Ark International Export Company of India and a unisex clothier named Noah's Ark Closet (*I hope that doesn't involve burlap*). And let's not forget the behemoth, cubit-measured gen-u-ine replica of the ark in Williamston, Kentucky.

Evidently, Noah's Ark gets around, the reluctant seaman and his barge offering a case study in brand recognition. Yet, even if most folks have some familiarity with the basic bullet points of the Noah narrative, there are relatively few who linger long enough to grasp its profound theological message about the character of God. Many dismiss the story as intellectually insufficient, the remnant of ancient myth or fantasy; others find it implausible or irrelevant, while another swath of folks miss the whole point of the narrative because they are wrapped up in the crazy, futile gymnastics of trying to prove it historically, thus

seeking to answer questions that were never meant to be asked of the text in the first place.

At its core, the Noah saga is not about the flood, nor does it present some Discovery Channel account proposing investigative theories of what happened ... again, missing the point. Borrowing elements from the flood narratives common to other middle-eastern religions, what the story provides is a setting to express a particular affirmation of Israel's faith. Walter Brueggemann says that "the flood narrative confronts the basic incongruity of human life." It reveals "a recalcitrant creation resistant to the purposes of the very one by whom and for whom the world exists." (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*)

The text says, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart."

The text reveals a God who is personal, who feels the pain of rejection, who is wounded by the indifference of those he loves, who is vexed by the self-destructiveness of those who refuse to do the things he

knows would bring a sense of purpose, fulfillment, joy. This is not the account of an impersonal deity, nor of an angry tyrant, but rather of a troubled parent who grieves the alienation, the growing distance between Creator and creation. Brueggemann points out that in the first chapter of Genesis, we have seen that God's creative power is not coercive and authoritarian. Rather, "it is invitational and permitting. God wills creation to be turned toward him, but God does not commandeer it." (Brueggemann, *Genesis*)

In the stories that follow, Adam and Eve/Cain and Abel, we see the resistance of creation to the wisdom, counsel, and design of the creator and the inevitability of conflict and death wherever self-interest eclipses common welfare.

In chapters 6 and 7, we see what is a typically human sensibility of justice: crime/punishment, woundedness/vengeance. "And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.'"

It's door slammin', desk throwing, torch lighting, wad it up, burn it down, dunk it and drown it time in the design room of Cosmos Incorporated. You know or have witnessed the frustration wrought when the product of what you want to do does not match your expectation: Golfer throws clubs, bag, golf balls into a lake; DIYer punches through the sheetrock he measured incorrectly; writer throws laptop out the window; artist takes a crowbar to her painting.

It is God's "I've had it"—"I can't take it anymore"—"Take this job and shove it"—"Elvis has left the building"—"I'm outta here" moment. "And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.'"

But notice that in the story, God can't quite abandon the world God created. Noah and family, animals 2 x 2, and a big ol' boat. The reluctant sailor and his menagerie become the bridge to something new and different; the catalyst for change in the heart of God.

Catharsis may have accompanied the flight of your 2 iron into the lake, but it did not heal your slice or your volatile heart; and that laptop lying in a thousand pieces on the sidewalk below your window didn't give you an extension on your deadline. The tantrum rarely resolves the problem or heals the wound. Revenge is seldom sweet, and even then, it's fleeting. Retribution only enshrines the bitterness.

Is this what God comes to understand as the flood waters rise? I don't know, maybe the sight of the ark and Noah and the animals sailing into the sunrise is medicinal for God's troubled heart in the way those poignant pet videos bring a touch of light to our infuriating, I-don't-understand-people days, restoring a bit of our faith in creation; or maybe the sight of ark, animal, and Noah's family widens the heart of God in the way the weight of the getaway sled stretches the Grinch's heart three times its size – something changes out there on the sea.

“God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth ... I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and

the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

Walter Brueggemann says that the structure of indictment-sentence in which God resolves to punish the guilty has been changed. “The one-to-one connection of guilt and punishment is broken.” With the covenant signified in the rainbow, we are now assured that what evil we may see or endure “is not rooted in the anger or rejection of God. The relation of creator to creature is no longer a scheme of retribution. Because of a revolution in the heart of God, that relation is now based in unqualified grace.” (Brueggemann, *Genesis*) When the church sings *How Firm a Foundation*, we affirm this same thing:

"The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!"

Does God actually change God’s mind here, or does the story represent the evolution in Israel’s understanding of the character of

God? I don't know, but what the Noah narrative concludes is that our God's authority and character are not defined by fear and retribution, but rather by relationship and love. This understanding has a transformative impact on the way we see and relate to God. God is not the tyrannical authoritarian despot who rules by intimidation, marshalling your behavior through fear of torture. Rather God's love is like the father who runs to welcome the prodigal home and the mother who will not forsake her nursing child. We do not behave in order to escape pain and punishment. Rather, in gratitude and loving awe we seek to live in a way that would honor and not wound or disappoint the One we revere, love, and adore.

Do you know that kind of love? Someone you would do anything to honor? Someone you would never want to disappoint? You never fear losing that person's love, for you know that person is incapable of not loving you. When inevitably you do disappoint, and you do wound, that person does not forsake you, will never forsake you. To understand God is to know this kind of love. As the apostle Paul observes, So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see,

everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

The covenant that God declared to Noah is poignantly exhibited in the book of the prophet Hosea where the Lord torturously labors over what to do about a rebellious Israel. Here you see the pathos and pain and perseverance of a love that cannot/will not let go of the beloved.

1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. 2 The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. 3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.”

Here you see the pain caused in love scorned, and in the next verses we see the anger the wound prompts:

5 They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. 6 The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours

because of their schemes. 7 My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.”

Will God abandon them and walk away? Or is the love stronger than the anger? Listen to the change in mood and intention.

8 How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. 9 I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

This is the love of God, a love that would be exemplified most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Perhaps John sums it up best for us, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us.”

So, let us not live in fear, let us live for God, in whose love we will always dwell secure. Amen.