

THE FIRST
SUNDAY IN
LENT

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Genesis 9:8-17 Lent 1B 2012

Never Again

"I establish my covenant with 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." 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. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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."

Never again, never again... These are words of deep sorrow spoken right out of the heart of God to God's people. The story of Noah and the Ark has so long been relegated to our Sunday school rooms that we have failed to remember its power. And that is understandable, a story that has a rainbow, and a giant barn of a ship, stuffed with animals is just perfect to capture the childlike imagination.

When we think about Noah and the ark, we often forget the devastation of the flood and what it said about the disintegrating state of affairs between the Creator and the created.

And when we do talk about the "the Flood" we tell it as a story about God's wrath—about God's destructive power and God's desire to punish the wayward human race. But you see-- we've got it all wrong.

The story of the flood is not a story of God's divine and wrathful judgment, it is a story about God's unspeakable sorrow. So what I want us to do this morning, more than anything is actually to take a journey back through time.

I want to go back before the time of this global economic instability and fear; back before the time that anxiety seemed the order of the day. Back before fundamentalism became the most prominent religion in America, I want to go back before that time when we had to take the Bible literally and lose so much of its power and its grace.

And I want to go back, back in time before Constantine and Christianity became the state religion and we became arrayed in royal court vestments. I want to back further, even before Jesus walked up to the Jordan and was dipped in those muddy waters by John.

I want to go back all the way back to when those wonderful Hebrew writers were telling the story of Genesis for the first time, I want to go back and sit at their feet and I want to remember that story the way we were meant to hear it; the way we were meant to receive it before it got relegated to Sunday school rooms and nursery walls.

And it is a captivating story for children; and it does capture our childlike imaginations. But if we go back and sit at the feet of those original story tellers, we can hear something so much more powerful.

This is in fact not a children's story. This is a story so powerful it cannot even be contained within God's created order, this is a story, not of a floating barn filled with animals on the sea, and this is especially not a story of God's wrath against humankind.

This beautiful allegory is actually a story about God's heartache and God's grief over the loss of love and connection with the human family. A grief that is so overwhelming that it bursts out from the bounds of chaos and it floods human history. Let's go back and remember that story.

Almost from the beginning, after God created humankind, what was the first thing that humankind wanted to do? I think we had one or two dewy mornings in Eden before we looked at the sign that said no trespassing and decided we must have that particular piece of fruit, right?

And shortly after that, when God asks, "What happened?" we begin blaming one another: It was not me it was this woman you gave me, it was not me, it was this serpent you placed in my path. There is actually a lot of wonderful humor with Hebrew story; some of it is hard to miss.

But there is heartbreak in each line as well. Very quickly we move from God's delight in chapter 1 of the Genesis story as God gazes upon the created order and declares it good to the sorry state of human affairs that unwind to such a point that by chapter 6 we hear the heartbreaking words,

“And the Lord gazed upon these humans that he had made and was saddened that he had placed them upon the face of the earth and God’s heart was grief stricken. That is quite a deterioration of God and human affairs.

So here we are, we have God who created humankind for mutual joy and for mutual care of one another, for the mutual joy and care of all the other parts of the created order that God had provided as well as the mutual joy and care of humans to God.

But we were unruly, we were recalcitrant, we did everything we could to turn our backs on God and one another. We reject God’s invitation to be a people of mercy and justice and in the richness of the Hebrew story we hear that God simply turns God’s back on the created order.

This is a sad and scary moment in time when this God who held back the chaos and created the heavens and created the earth, says in effect to the human creature, “Alright, you want the life of chaos; you want to murder one another, degrade one another, and live for yourselves alone.

I will give that for which you ask---a world free from my ordering, loving presence; I will give you a world devoid of mutuality and beauty if this is what you desire.

And the story tell us in fact not that God flooded the earth, but that God turned God’s face from humankind—that God turned God’s back on the world in and God’s absence the waters of chaos that God held within their bounds, came flooding back in and the earth was devastated.

And then we come to this poignant moment between God and Noah as we see God gazing on the devastation of the earth and the near utter annihilation of humankind.

And then God’s grief is compounded and shattered as he gazes upon this faithful remnant, Noah and his family, this one faithful man in all the earth who was the only spark of hope in God’s heart for humankind.

God gazes upon the devastation and declares, never ever again. We hear God say the phrase “never again” three times and I am here to tell you that when God says something three times we are meant to know we should take that very seriously.

So we hear how God cuts this beautiful covenant with Noah, and actually that’s not even true exactly because a covenant requires that the two parties in the agreement each have a responsibility to seeing that the covenant is upheld.

But what we see God doing here is actually making a promise, God makes a covenantal promise to Noah and through Noah to all of humankind, not only Noah’s descendents, not only the descendents of the ancient Israelites but to all humankind in all in the created order that lives upon the earth.

God decides right then and right there that God will never again allow chaos to have its ultimate way with us. This is the moment, those ancient storytellers tell us, that in effect God finally accepts us just as we are.

All this time God has been trying to show us a better way and God figures out, you know what, my creatures just don’t get it, but God has hope for us. Noah story becomes our hope just as Noah was God’s hope.

But even still, God knows we will continue to break God’s heart and so God simply weeps for us and calls us back in relationship as a people of hope.

In this season of Lent we are asked to look hard at those places and situations where God still weeps for us every day.

When God gazes down upon the war torn devastation of Iraq and Afghanistan and the rest of the violence going on in the Middle East--- God weeps. God weeps as God gazes upon those places where people languish and perish from hunger, poverty and need while others ignore their plight.

But that rainbow stretched across the heavens is the symbol of both peace and hope. And to “hope” means to “desire with expectation of obtainment” or to “expect with confidence.” Claiming partnership with God’s hope for all of God’s creation is the way we will make a difference in this world.

Hope, the *expectation* that things will get better, not only gets us through the difficult times, but also gives us strength to work proactively in the interest of a just and peaceful world.

Hope is what helps communities rebuild after devastating natural disasters. Hope is what moves an addict through to the next day without succumbing to the desire to feed the addiction.

Hope encourages the faith community to seek justice for all *now*, while waiting expectantly for the reign of Christ which will finally usher in pure justice.¹

In a world that sometimes seems so lacking in hope, we can resolve to walk closely with God and live that hope for others. That rainbow gives all of us the courage to look upon the pain in our world and utter with God, “never again, never again, never again.” Amen.

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¹ *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice*, Year B.