

“Reminders”
Genesis 9:8-17
Andrew Foster Connors
1st Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018

Of all the stories in the bible, Noah’s ark is probably one of the most marketed. Most toy companies that are otherwise secular in every way still have a Noah’s Ark line for kids. Fisher-Price captures it well: “Noah, using all he knew, built himself a floating zoo with lots of animals, all times two, ready to come and play with you!” Now I know that this story has some highly marketable items: the animals, the pairs, the boat, but I’ve always found it interesting that this is the story we teach to our kids: the one where God destroys all but a few creatures because of rampant wickedness. Maybe Fisher-Price needs a new poem - “Noah escaped God’s holy wrath, even you can do the math. Pray that it’s your family, saved from swimming in the sea.”

This is not the kind of story I like to share with my children especially not at an early age: God destroying all living creatures because they’re not living up to expectations. God wiping out humanity because they didn’t pass this year’s parent-teacher conference. God smiting everybody because she can’t take the reality of human sin.

It’s distressing, especially in a city drenched in violence, especially in a week with another school shooting. I don’t know anybody in this church who would suggest that we work *this kind of God* into the early childhood curriculum. I don’t believe God smites human beings. I don’t believe God punishes people with natural catastrophes. I don’t believe that God employs this kind of violence. We’ve left this station of faith behind with other pre-modern superstitions. We try to distance ourselves from this kind theology, not explain it.

It’s comforting, I suppose, that the church’s Hebrew ancestors aren’t the first religious people to concoct such a story. Religions from around the world have similar stories. The Lakota told a story about a water monster, who fought the people and caused a great flood. A giant eagle swept down and saved one girl from the flood, carrying her to a tree on the highest pinnacle. They married and she bore twins who became the ancestors of the Sioux. The Cameroonians had a story about a goat that warned a kind girl that a flood was coming. She and her brother ran from the flood that destroyed their village, and were allowed to marry by the same talking goat as long as they put a hoe-handle and a clay pot with a broken bottom on their roof. The Mayans told a number of stories including one where a flood was sent to destroy the earth and three people survived in a canoe. More religions than not seem to have some kind of a flood story.

I suppose it’s good news that we’re not the first religious family with the story of a God who destroys the earth with a flood. It makes it a little less embarrassing; makes us a little less odd, a little less unique in our God-as-destroyer theology. We’re not the only faith with this station of faith along the journey. Most religious faiths have a version of this story, too. Most other cultures have to deal with this one, too.

Looking around at the world, it's not hard to understand why this story's so common. People do bad things to each other. 342 murders last year tell that story. The Gun Trace Task Force with deep corruption in our police department tells that story. Another mass shooting at a school and a nation more concerned with protecting our right to bear arms than promoting our children's safety tells that story. People hurt each other in devilish ways. Maybe we tell these stories to warn people that there are thresholds that God does not allow us to cross, there are consequences that will follow. Violence leveled against others inevitably comes back to bite us. Maybe that's the intent of these kinds of stories.

Or maybe we tell ourselves these stories because we know what it's like to look around at the world and fantasize about starting over. You experience a relationship that seems to go from bad to worse the more focus you give it, and you fantasize about starting over. You look at a choice you made in career, or family, or a choice that was made for you in childhood and you fantasize about wiping the slate clean and starting it all over. Looking back at our politics for the last 20 years, it makes me want to start over. Looking back at the racist history of our country and its present effects makes me want to start over. Looking back at the unholy alliance between the church and civil power through the centuries makes me want to start all over.

It's easy to see why these flood stories are so popular. It's not hard to imagine a God who fantasizes about starting over, wiping the slate clean, replaying the whole human project. Because there are some problems so deep, that it seems even divine power can't make things better without ending it all and starting over. It's easy to see why there are flood stories in just about every culture, every religious tradition to express this deep dissatisfaction with the world as we find it, and the hope that we might start it all over again.

But in a lot of these flood stories from other religious traditions, the people who are saved are heroic figures. They become the dignified ancestors of their peoples. They become the models of humanity that a people can claim and look up to. Noah and his family start out that way. They please God initially – that's why God chooses to save them. Noah was a righteous man the text says.

Yet after the flood, after the ark, in the very next chapter, the whole family makes a mess of things. The footnote in my Bible says, "Noah's dysfunctional family." Starting over hasn't fixed everything. Starting over hasn't made it all better. Starting over hasn't fixed the world the way God wants it. In fact, in the previous chapter God has just concluded that the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.

Bad stuff is likely to happen again. Terrible stuff is likely to happen again. Injustice, violence, and hurt are likely to happen again. Which is what makes God's covenant – God's promise never to employ this kind of violence again – so surprising. Human sin and all of the injustice, hurt, and suffering that comes with it should be a reason to break a relationship, not deepen one. It should be the reason for keeping this flood option on the table for another go. It should be a reason for God to withdraw from the world and its people, not dig deeper into it.

But God redoubles the commitment with eyes wide open, making a covenant knowing full well that the road ahead is going to be painful, knowing full well there's

going to be disappointment, knowing full well that the relationship that God is choosing is less than what God had hoped. That is God's choice – to take human beings as they are. To bear with us as we are. That's what love is, at least for this God. It's not always a good feeling. It's choosing to commit to a people through thick and thin. Choosing to limit God's freedom in order to be with this people. Choosing to limit God's freedom to make a relationship possible.

Maybe in our own time of violence, this is the commitment that we need to remember. The choice that God makes to deepen relationship with us instead of pulling back from it. Maybe in our own time when the lack of hope encourages us to shrink from pressing toward the goals of equity, and justice, and freedom: the choice God makes to stick with us precisely at a time when our kind seems irredeemable. Maybe in our own time when violence is so close to so many of us. The choice God makes to love us especially when that choice isn't the only available option.

The fantasy of wiping evil off the face of the earth won't come with our violence. It can only be reduced when we get closer to the pain of the world. Maybe that's the hardest part of our Lenten preparation. Coming to terms that if you want to change the things that make you the angriest, if you want to tackle the injustice that leaves you most in despair, there's no way to avoid suffering the pain of the world. The pain of injustice. The pain of betrayal. The pain of loss that arises from the inclination of the human heart.

If you have a hard time choosing that way, you're in good company. It's seems that God's first inclination are close to our own – from a desire to rip evildoers from their perches, to the despair of thinking there is nothing you can do to change any of it. God knows those feelings are going to come again – hot anger than threatens violence; deep despair that promotes retreat. Whenever you love justice and people that deeply, you will be cursed with those feelings for the entirety of your life. It's why God puts the rainbow in the sky. God needs a reminder. A reminder that violence didn't work out the way God wanted it. A reminder that God has chosen a different path. We have more options.

And maybe that part of the Noah story is one we can teach to our children. On Wednesday morning at the Bible study, a mom in the group expressed what sounded to me like her own dissatisfaction with the idea that parenting children was likely the only significant contribution she was making to the world. On the morning just before we all learned of another troubled young man picking up another gun, she said dismissively, "I'm not doing much, just raising a few boys to be decent people." I wished I had told her how God knows how difficult that work is. Loving people into their best selves. Loving them knowing the outcomes are never assured. Teaching them through your own anger and despair that the world really is good, that violence is a dead end, that love might seem like the weaker of ways because suffering is never something any of us chooses for its own sake. I wished I had thanked her.