

Sermon: Year B, I Lent

Texts: Genesis 9:8-17

I Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

If I were to ask you to close your eyes for a moment and then tell me what image comes to mind with the mention of the name Noah, I think that I could predict with fair accuracy what most of you imagined: a boat, with a long ramp, and an even longer line of complacent animals, standing two by two, as, in the distance, dark clouds are gathering. It's a soothing image, rendered in countless variations across centuries and cultures. Never mind that it's unreal and deeply contradictory to all that we actually know about how the world works. Nonetheless, this picture captures us like a dream.

Noah and the flood is one of the most popular stories told to young children for it suggests a world of kindness and peace, of natural order and community without cost. We have seamlessly transformed the original myth told in Genesis into a beloved fairy tale, which, for that age of youthful innocence is wonderful. For many years my daughter kept in her room a wooden model of the ark, complete with small figures of giraffes and lions and hippopotami – the exotic animals of creation. It seemed to fit with all the fresh hopes of childhood.

But like many of the fables learned in nurseries, the story of Noah, understood in this way, didn't age all that well. The grittiness of life imposes itself. Cats disappear, and coyotes don't even leave a note of thanks. Deer cross the road without looking, and when foxes appear the rabbits go missing. Nature can be ruthless. And soon enough, among children themselves playgrounds illicit their own form of competition and cruelty. By high school many have read Lord of the Flies, and the ark, like a glass slipper, seems quaint at best, an ever receding romantic sentiment. When my daughter left for college, she left the ark behind to gather dust – both the model and, just as likely, the story itself.

We need to change the way we imagine this myth, because it's not really a story about animals or order or peace. It's a story about unimaginable violence and destruction, about infinite anger unleashed on a finite world. Noah himself, we must remember, is the exception, not the rule. At the British Art Museum in New Haven there is an alternative depiction of the story. It doesn't include an ark. It's a painting of the flood. The huge canvas is awash in thick layers of red and black paint, and all that is apparent to the eye is an ominous, consuming turbulence. It's deeply unsettling. And if you look closely into this dark chaos, what slowly emerges to view, barely perceptible, is one last promontory, a slim wedge of land not yet submerged, on which there are several windblown trees, to which are clinging the few, last, desperate persons, whose fate is inevitable. This is the bigger story, the letting loose of God's wrathful judgment and the end for all but a very tiny remnant.

The painting is horrific, and so is this part of the story. But it's the necessary preface for what was read this morning. For what comes afterward, after all this immense destruction, is an immediate promise that is even greater. God makes a covenant that never again will he subject creation to this kind of sweeping condemnation. This was not an agreement made between Noah and God, nor was it the result of a long process of policy review and forward looking

amendments. It was a promise made suddenly and unilaterally, without conditions. It was as if God looked at the carnage he wrought and realized that it had gained nothing. Before long, Noah and his offspring proved no better than those who had perished. The same unrighteousness persisted, and, by rights, another flood, another mass elimination would have been warranted. But God refuses this, no matter what happens. Once was enough. Once was too often. It is as if God himself repented – not of doing wrong but, more importantly, of not seeing how true righteousness endures. The decree is this: love is more important than what is right. And with this recognition, God’s relationship with all of creation shifted. God saw all that he had made in a new way.

What the story of Noah tells us, most significantly, is that destruction -- no matter how deserved -- never provides resolution or answers or satisfaction or fulfillment. It only results in emptiness. Creation turns into desolation. Joy is drowned in sorrow. Violence achieves nothing. Put more accurately, all that violence achieves is nothingness. This is no child’s tale. It’s dead serious. It’s never a story that’s outgrown. It’s a myth that endures through all time and all ages – because we never mature beyond the impulse to clean slates, to wash our hands of others, to one way or another eliminate those that irritate us or demean us or threaten us. Judgment is one of our strongest desires.

It should be noted that both the wound of the story and the promise of the story become the intense struggle of all of the rest of the Old Testament. All that follows is the record of God’s covenant tested and battered by our history. For what is lived in time is our repeated unrighteousness. Thus it is reported, that in the face of continual rebellion by all the generations of Israel, from Abraham through Moses and David and the prophets of the nations, God is again and again tempted to resort once more to condemnation. The election of a chosen people makes no difference. The liberation from Egypt makes no difference. The giving of the law makes no difference. The selection of kings makes no difference. The calling of prophets makes no difference. Still, always, the people wander, refuse, and reject God. And all along the way, starting over, starting afresh, wiping out the troublesome seems to be the most efficient solution.

But God’s promise endures. It endures until, finally, at great cost to God, a radically different possibility is revealed. In Jesus, God the rightful judge is himself judged and condemned to death. What is wrong is allowed to be maximally and emphatically wrong. Yet this ultimate violence is met, then, by resurrection and the reiteration of the promise to Noah, now in infinite form. Never again. Grace overwhelms every offense. The peace that Jesus offered was not born of righteousness but indefatigable love, shown in forgiveness, and it is in forgiveness that the glory of God can be seen.

As the church, we are called to give witness to this specific glory. That’s an extraordinary calling, because our own temptation, like that for all who have preceded us, is to presume our own righteousness while indicting others, and to make forgiveness the rather meager exercise of merely settling accounts. We often don’t live within the far greater dimensions of the story of Noah – neither the wound nor the promise. And thus we make love frail and God woefully small. Right and wrong take precedence, even over resurrection, and others, looking at us, frequently see, then, only the hypocrisy of our judgments and, in place of glory, false pride. Our task is to make our faith mythic, as deep as the waters of the flood, as brilliant as the colors of the rainbow

– so that what others see in us is not just more of the world’s common ugliness buffed up a little because it’s done in God’s name, but a peace that passes understanding and such depth of love and forgiveness that something of the resurrection shines through.

Floods take many forms when our unrighteousness is exposed. In the last several decades, we have had the dubious luxury of watching from the sidelines as genocide occurs among others. And we are ourselves involved now in a great wash of anxiety and economic recession as we get battered each day by more and more reports of individual deceit and institutional failure and corruption. Wretchedness, which is bigger than all of us, persists. We are complicit in it. But, all the more, it is love that endures, Into its vast embrace we need to place our lives, and then reaching out in the same love, we must seek to engage one another – in ways appropriate to Noah.

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