

“Noah’s Threshold and the Real Meaning of Rainbows!”

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Noah and the Big Flood, FCMF#1

Scriptures: Genesis 6:12-14, 18-20 and 9:8-15

Genesis 6:12 And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. 13 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. 14 Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch... 18 But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. 19 And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. 20 Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive."

Genesis 9:8-15 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11 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." 12 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: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 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. "

Sermon

Perhaps some of you are wondering what the story of Noah,
his ark and rainbows have to do with Lent, and our theme for Lent;
“Crossing the Threshold for Transformation”

I will say more of course, but for the moment, simply try
and consider Noah’s call by God to build a boat,
as his space of transformation and “a place of wild possibility,
to imagine, to dream, and to question.”

No doubt we are all familiar with the story
and just as likely, we are all a bit uncomfortable with it as well.

For the modern scientific mind the idea of water
 covering the entire earth's surface,
or the possibility of Noah building a single boat
 capable of holding every known species of land animal
 goes far beyond the realm of possibility.
For those of us who are a part of a modern theological discourse,
 one that believes in a loving and merciful God,
 it is also hard to read this story, let alone take it seriously,
as we hear our God decide to brutally kill
 all but a handful of humanity.
And for those who believe in a God that is just,
 the fact that this flood also killed off all but two of every species
 in the animal kingdom, well doesn't seem at all fair or just.

This story, on so many levels, is a troubling story,
 so much so that one has to wonder
 if it's still relevant and even worth talking about?
But, I guess, since I am preaching on it this morning,
 I do still see some relevant things worthy of our consideration.
For in this story of Noah's flood I do find a story
 of historic thresholds being crossed and of monumental
 transformation in our understanding of our Divine Creator.

For me the first step is to not take everything in this story literally.
 It is also helpful to know that the ancient world
understood earthly phenomena and Divine intervention
 in a far different way than how we do today.
For the ancient Hebrews, God was all powerful,
 limitless and far beyond our understanding.
God made the universe and thus He,
 (and God was always a He back in those days!)
 had the right to make the rules.
But he was also beyond the rules, so he could also
 change the rules and he could break the rules as he saw fit.
There was only one source for everything,
 both the good and the bad, and that was God.

But we also have in the OT scriptures another view of God.
 A God that was constantly intervening in
and communicating directly with
 His creation in very intimate ways.

God often was said to have walked and talked with his people
and quite often God seemed to take on many human attributes,
reflecting both positive and negative aspects.

As our story opens, God is said to be grieving,
and regretting that he ever started this whole mess.
Specifically I'm wondering if God was regretting planting those two trees,
one of life and the other, the knowledge of good and evil
in his original garden and then allowing those two
original humans the choice to eat or not to eat of their fruit?
Because, according to God, those two and all subsequent
progeny have chosen to do evil more often than the good.

I also find it curious that the "corruption"
that God names is violence. Hmm...!?
Don't you think that's interesting?
If you do, then say it with me, "Hmm?!"
"Corruption and violence!" Can we really say
that we modern, scientific and theological human beings
have actually evolved all that much?
And how unfortunately true is it still today
that not all this violence is just between us Homo sapiens.
In this story the whole of God's creation was suffering,
suffering due to the choices made by those
said to have been crafted in the very image of God.
But are we are we any smarter?
Global, human created, warming is now
eliminating entire species at an alarming rate.
Coastlines, islands and entire cities will soon be flooded,
underwater as the polar ice caps melt at historic rates.
These events may not match the fanciful drama of Noah's flood
but the results are no less catastrophic for those who lie in its wake.

While the early Hebrews considered natural calamities
as God's judgement upon both personal and group decisions,
we now know them as the law of intended consequences.

If we humans choose to rape, pillage and pollute
our natural environment, we know there will be consequences.
Those poor ignorant ancient folks naively blamed God for their misfortune
but we now know we have no one to blame but ourselves -

Perhaps ignorance is bliss?

But perhaps more troubling than what the story has to say about us
is what the story seems to be telling us about the character of God.
Saving a few righteous while simultaneously killing of a multitude
does not seem consistent with a loving and merciful God.
But again part of this is due to how the ancient world viewed God.
God was part of the tribe, specifically our tribe.
Just like today when opposing football teams prayers for victory
also means praying for the defeat of their opponent,
in the ancient world each kingdom had its own deity
who would provide for them while also punishing their enemies.
And sadly, I must add, this was often the case
even for Yahweh the God of our Bible.

But I'm getting ahead of myself a bit, since God in our story
was not making his covenant with an entire tribe
but with only a single extended family, Noah and his sons.
But it is also interesting to note that God mentions
that his covenant is also between him and the entire "earth."
God's people, at this point, are limited to one family.
This will change of course as we look at future covenants
such as between God and Abraham, God and Moses,
God and Jeremiah and finally a covenant through Jesus.
And I what I hope to point out, as we look at each of those covenants
in the coming weeks is that each one was unique.

Each "covenant" was the result of a unique set of circumstances,
they were thresholds in the ever evolving relationship
between created humanity and our Creator!

In today's reading we encounter the word covenant,
or in this instance, God's promise to never,
ever again destroy the earth with water.
Now some of us might be tempted to respond, "Well, gee, thanks God!"
sarcastically realizing that this still leaves
a whole lot of other ways that the world can come to an end.
Our planet can still be destroyed by being struck by a comet
or through thermonuclear war,
but at least we can check floods off that list!

But in the world view of the writers of this story,
 who believed God had no limits whatsoever,
a promise by God to actually limit himself,
 would have been a monumental shift in understanding.
That my friends was a pretty big threshold for Noah
 and the ancient world to have crossed over.
Building a boat big enough to hold two of every living critter,
 however, would have been likely less difficult.
Yes, God was asking him to leave the known
 and boldly step into the unknown, and into the wild possibilities
 that laid beyond his imaginations and dreams.
For God was asking him to do more than simply build a boat,
 God was calling him to keep the entire world alive.
So often we warn each other by saying,
 “You can’t save the world!”
But we could not have said that to Noah,
 because that’s exactly what God was asking him to do!
But I am also convinced that the point of the story
 is more about God than it is about Noah.

This was not the first and nor would it be the last time
 that God was so discouraged by the human race
 that he wanted to wipe them out and start over.
But as justified as the authors of the story seem to make him
 God on the other hand choses to never to go through with it.
God always seems to find another way,
 ways that are actually redemptive.
Because no matter how evil and violent things might get
 God still seems to find something in his creation worth saving.

Now I’m not saying that God will always save us
 from the intended consequences of our actions.
Our greed and our unquenchable thirst for violence
 in the end might still become our ultimate undoing.
And perhaps, in the end,
 there may be too few of us to turn that ship around.
But, maybe, with God’s help, working with only a few of us,
 folks who are hollering, kicking and screaming

and who have also come to realize
that we are all, all of us, lions, tigers, and bears, oh my,
as well as hippos, giraffes and honey bees -
are in the same boat of survival together.
And as we hang on for dear life, we realize that we need each other
in order to stay alive as we keep searching for dry land.
We need our earth to carry us to a shore where we can finally live in peace
and harmony just as God had originally intended for us to live.

And that hope that God has in us was given the sign of the rainbow.

Now when I was little, whenever I saw a rainbow,
I would think about Noah's flood and I would also begin to wonder
how the end of the world might actually come.

(Yes, I know this sounds kinda depressing!)

But now, rather than just taking a sigh of relief (ain't gonna be a flood),
I take it as reminder of something else,
a reminder of God's hope in me and in the rest of the human race.

A reminder that God has never and will never
give up on this old world that He/She created.

And no matter how bad things seem to get
or how much we mess things up, God will always
be finding something in me and in my compatriots
and within creation worth saving and worth finding hope in.

That for me is what the promise of a rainbow means!

Reminding me of a loving, hope-filled and playful God,
and how each rainbow is a threshold for me to cross over.