

Sermon on Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:3-4 Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.

Introduction

Some stories in the First Testament can cause grave internal turmoil. The first five books making up the Torah (the revelation of the law) of the Hebrew Scriptures reveals radical and at times seemingly chaotic stories of God's relationship with the world, with humanity, and with Israel in specific. It's no surprise then that "why?" often escapes our lips as we read these stories. Why would God divide humanity by confusing language? Why would God send a flood? Why would God allow Israel to be brought under captivity and thus into exile? Why would God open the ground and swallow not only the guilty Korah but his family as well? If God is a God of love, then Why? Why all this divine disaster and heavenly havoc?

These whys echo a fear living deep in subterranean crevices and crannies of our person and being. As we read these stories they poke and provoke this fear: would I be washed away? dropped into the pit? thrust into exile? destroyed by some theotic whim of a divine bad mood? These questions haunt us as we read through the first testament and contemplate the deeds and activity of God. Under all of it surges what feels like our eternal question on repeat: if God is love how is any of this destruction love?

We get lost in the details of the storied wrath of God and miss the overarching metanarrative of the love-story embedded in and told by the composite biblical story. Truly, because of our human experiences and our self-knowledge and the myths we believe about ourselves and our unloveliness, we identify with the ones swept away and dropped down and not the ones rescued or moved to safety; and these stories terrify us. The seemingly random righteous exceptionalism of Noah becomes the plumbline against which we are shown lacking. So, we get stuck in the flood and forget that the waters recede, we miss the rainbow for the raindrops, and we forget that which God brings to death is raised into new life.

Genesis 9:8-17

"God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 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. 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..."

Genesis 9:8-16

We all are familiar with the story of Noah, the flood, and the ark.[1] A flood of assumed divine origin washes the earth clean of the evil and wickedness that has stained the earth and taken up residence in human hearts. What is less familiar to many of us is that the flood story isn't solely about God's anger at evil and wickedness on the earth and in the heart. The flood is ultimately about God cleansing that which God loves. I know it may be hard to believe this especially considering the long tradition in the church of overemphasizing God's anger over and against God's love—even going to the extent of saying that God's anger is God's love, which is just an atrocity in theology causing spiritual trauma rather than trust.

The story about the flood and Noah and the ark isn't ultimately about wrath but about love. Looking at the arch of the story line floating through the waters of the text, it's the promise God makes here with Noah that is solid ground for the reader. The promise is the ultimate point, the flood is only the penultimate point. But we get confused; we get stuck in the waters and caught up with the rising tide of divine wrath and conclude that God is primarily angry and then if we are good God is loving. Rather, it's that God is loving even when we are weak and frail and covered in wickedness and evil.

For the Israelites, the story of the flood represented not strictly God's active pathos manifest in anger, but God relenting and promising: never again will I do this thing because humanity is weak. It's in the flood story where God identifies and accepts the weakness of humanity[2] prone to mishearing, misunderstanding, and misstepping. And it's in the rescue of Noah and his family, the divinely proclaimed upright, with whom God makes a covenant. This covenant is not strictly with Noah and his sons but with the entire world. From this point on, all of humanity is brought under the arching bow of color in the sky. The "offspring" of Noah is not strictly the Noahic family line sharing the same immediate mom and dad. Considering the story mentions that all humanity—save Noah and his family—was washed away in the flood, this means all humanity that now populates the earth are all Noah's descendants.[3] By the time this story is formed and passed from story teller to story teller, generations upon generations are included in the covenant.[4] And not only humans, but animals (all of them) from the very, very big to the very, very small, are included in the divine spoken promise of never again.[5]

None of us here or any of our foremothers and forefathers knows a time when the covenant spoken between God and Noah—on behalf of the entire world and every living thing—didn't exist. For as long as humans have been telling and sharing stories and eras before history could be recorded in writing, God promised never to come after wickedness and evil by washing out humanity unto death. Rather, from this moment on, when God comes after wickedness and evil, when God attends to human kingdoms and structures bent on destruction, and when God seeks us to mend us and heal our hearts, God will do so through God's self. God will wash the earth and humanity and all creation through God's love, God's life, and God's light. God will do so not by remaining remote but by coming near and intimately identifying with human suffering and weakness and frailty. God will take death into God's own body and destroy it.

Conclusion

And the rainbow arcs across the sky forever carrying with it the reminder that the earth is not abandoned and won't be abandoned.[6] The arch of colors scientifically explained, does not lose its mystery and absurdity.[7] While we know how rainbows happen, we don't know why they need to happen. The world could exist just fine without them, but with our atmosphere and our sun we get to have rainbows. And in that mystery and absurdity we are pulled up out of ourselves as our gaze moves from our navel to that which is above. We are reminded that there is something beyond us, something outside of us, something we didn't cause and didn't create. It lies outside of our abilities and talents and paints the sky in beauty whether we've been good or bad. And, for those of us who travel this earth tracking with the Hebrew and Christian narratives, it's a sign of comfort attached to the words of promise from God to Noah and all creation.[8] The rainbow is something tangible, reminding us: life wins, love wins, light wins.

The story of the flood reminds us that Love is triumphant as Life and Light revolt against death and darkness; and so, the story of the flood is foundational story of baptism. Death and darkness precede

life and light. It is being submerged into the waters of baptism where we die and receive new life.[9] Baptism is the sign of divine encounter attached to the words of promise delivered to the world through the incarnate Christ. As Christ is raised from death, so too will we be as baptism is “joined with the promise of life.”[10] In the midst of the waters of earth of our baptism, the rainbow arch of the waters of the sky remind us God isn’t absent but present, not silent but beckoning us out and into new hope, new presence, and new life.

As we travel through the season of Lent and self-reckoning in the encounter with God in the event of faith, we are dropped to the bottom of the pit and swept up in the waves of water. The story of the flood reminds us that to this pit and these waters, God will not abandon us. To answer one of the questions of Psalm 88, “Do you work wonders for the dead?” (v 10a), the flood story answers with a resounding yes. And that yes is declared in the sky in manifold color of divine glory: death has not the final answer, life does.[11]

[1] This is a story. A story historicizing a natural disaster that demolished the livelihood of civilization in the “cradle of society” in the fertile crescent (which was prone to floods, and big ones). Was the entire earth covered by one flood? Most likely not. Was this local world swept up in waves of water? Most likely. The story of Noah and the arc isn’t all that unique; we find significant overlap with flood and boat story in the Epic of Gilgamesh. When humans experience a massive natural disaster, we try to make sense of it and at times we ascribe divine activity to it because somehow such a thing brings comfort to us: this wasn’t chaotic but controlled. There’s also a need to explain why some were washed away and others weren’t. When the planes hit the twin towers, I was in midtown. A few months earlier in 2001 I was working downtown; that path train trapped under the collapsed building? That was my normal path train. Because of an event that happened earlier in the year, I was not on that train. From here and coupled with survivor’s guilt and the absurdity of surviving, we craft stories. We can’t handle surviving things that others haven’t so we are prone to ascribe divine activity because it’s the only way to make sense of some seemingly so chaotic. So, we craft story and legend and pass them on as beautiful markers of our humanity. If you examine your own journey, you’ll find similar instances of this behavior. For a similar story from the Utes, see the legend: “Rabbit Killed the Sun” which is a legend with significant imagery that seems to be speaking of (both) the solar eclipse that preceded the Clovis comet and the comet itself that hit the earth and decimated an entire people group.

[2] JPS Study Bible “Genesis” annotations by Jon D. Levenson. Eds Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler New York, NY: OUP 1999.

[3] JPS Study Bible Levenson

[4] Martin Luther Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14. Luther’s Works vol 2 Ed Jaroslav Pelikan 144. Promise is not only for those people and those lives of that context and generation but for all generations “until the end of the world.”

[5] Luther Genesis 143-4 “Moreover, because the covenant of which this passage is speaking of involves not only mankind but every living soul, it must be understood, not of the promise of the Seed but of this physical life, which even the dumb animals enjoy in common with us: this God does not intend to destroy in the future by a flood.”

[6] Luther Genesis 146-7 "...this bow stands there by divine pleasure, because of the will and promise of God, to give assurance to both [humanity] and beast that no flood will ever take place at any future time."

[7] Luther Genesis 146 Natural phenomenon with a divine application "...because of the Word of God, not because of some natural cause, the bow in the clouds has the meaning that no further flood will occur." Natural phenomenon with a divine application "...because of the Word of God, not because of some natural cause, the bow in the clouds has the meaning that no further flood will occur."

[8] Luther Genesis 144-5 "There was need for them to have a sign of life, from which they could learn God's blessing and good will. For this is the particular nature of signs, that they dispense comfort, not terror. To this end also the sign of the bow was established and added to the promise."

[9] Luther Genesis 153 "...Baptism and death are interchangeable terms in the Scripture. Therefore Paul says in Rom. 6:3: 'As many of us has have been baptized, have been baptized into the death of Christ.' Likewise, Christ says in Luke 12:50: 'I have a Baptism to be baptized with, and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!' And to His disciples He said (Mark 10:39): 'You will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.'"

[10] Luther Genesis 153

[11] Luther Genesis 154-5 "This must be applied also to other trials. We must learn to disdain dangers and to have hope even when no hope appears to be left, so that when death or any other danger befalls us, we may encourage ourselves and say: 'Behold, here is your Red Sea, your Flood, your baptism, and your death. Here your life...is barely a handbreadth away from death. But do not be afraid. This danger is like a handful of water, whereas through the Word you have a flood of grace. Therefore death will not destroy you but will be a thrust and aid toward life.'"