

Genesis 9:8-17 The Symphony of Grace
1 Peter 3:18-22
February 18, 2024

One of the beautiful scenes in the bible comes at the end of the story of the flood in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis. It is familiar to us because it involves a promise: that God will not destroy the earth by flood ever again; and a sign: which is the rainbow. Every time a rainbow appears in the sky, God is reminded, and we can be reminded, as well, if we think of it, of the covenant that God made after the flood, with Noah and all of his descendants.

It was, of course, the people themselves, behaving in reprehensible and destructive ways, a kind of chaotic noisiness that cringes the ears like fingernails on a blackboard or screeching tires or the clanging of pipes out of tune, that provoked God into such an action in the first place. And we all know the depths that people are capable of descending when it comes to depravity. It is our history, and we are reminded of it everyday because it is still happening. That is not news.

But there was something in God's nature that held back. Total destruction was not desired, instead God relented and saved the human race in an Ark, giving life back to the world. That *is* news. The flood is not the story of God destroying, but saving.

I think of the 130th Psalm;

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord.

2 Lord, hear my voice:
let thine ears be attentive to the sound of my supplications.

3 If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities,
O Lord, who shall stand?

4 But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou *mayest be feared*.

The image in Genesis is more striking than what we moderns might imagine. For us, floods come with rains and snow melt. In the understanding of the way the universe is put together among the people of that day, the whole universe was made out of water. In creation, God had separated the waters above the earth from the waters below the earth, to make a firmament, or expanse, in which life happened.

But God is righteous, at the unrighteousness of the people, the springs of the deep let loose, and the fountains of the heavens opened, and everything was submerged, baptized in the deluge, like a child scribbling over unsatisfactory artwork. Imagine trying to hold back *that* flood.

And the Ark was like a submarine of sorts, protecting, saving, all that was inside it. This image is a way of speaking about the mercy of God, and the tension between righteousness and mercy, the desire for justice and the desire for reconciliation, in the life of God.

The reading in 1 Peter mentions it as well,

“For Christ also suffered *once* for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous . . . to bring you to God.

And then there is this, to us, strange text about Jesus, “speaking to the imprisoned spirits,” that is, “to those who were disobedient long ago in the days of Noah while the Ark was being built,” and a few people were saved through water.

“And the water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also,” and notice the way in which the reading steers us away from a too literal interpretation, “not from the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God.”

We come here on the first Sunday of what we call the season of Lent, a reference to the, “lengthening of the days,” or the increasing sunlight from day-to-day as the earth in its journey around the sun approaches the vernal equinox, that is, the middle point between winter and summer when spring begins and the earth comes to life.

For us, those who are not only believers, but find meaning in the observance of a few weeks of personal sacrifice; the nurturing of the character trait of humility, and the voluntary acceptance of our sinfulness, our tendency to undertake actions driven by selfishness, and anger, and fear; and the dedication to repentance and preparation; for those who find meaning in all of that, this time of the year represents larger truths about life, that are present to us all year long.

Life is grace, it is a gift. It comes with beauty, and pleasure, but also a responsibility for and acknowledgment of a moral demand that is also a part of the fabric of everything that is.

Judgment is grace. Part of grace is the ability to determine the right and good, on the one hand, and on the other to be able to acknowledge the failure to achieve the good consistently.

And mercy is grace as well; that God has accepted us despite those failures, no matter what they may be. This mercy becomes the foundation our acceptance of each other. This is sensitive territory. There is not much more fragile than human self-esteem and the idea of Sin in an attack upon it. The only analogy we have is the kind of relationships we have with one another; parent-child, marriage, friendship.

Of course, In these relationships no one can fill the role of God in the divine-human relationship, so that the analogy breaks down if it is pushed too far. Yet the bible presents God in terms of these examples because they are a helpful way for us to understand, *to see in*, as long as we acknowledge that human parents, spouses, children, and friends are not God, and neither are we, and that God is not a human being.

Sometimes things happen in relationships that create harm, and situations can get to the point in which separation becomes, if not necessary, then at least

likely. In extreme circumstances it cannot be overlooked, or set aside.

We all know the kinds of things that would damage a relationship in such a way that an extreme state of disrepair would result; continual dishonesty, betrayal, excessive disregard for someone's well-being, violence.

When things get bad enough, the thought of reconciliation seems impossible. The only way to overcome these obstacles is for one, or both, partners, to take the hit, as it were, accept the harm without seeking any kind of recompense. And that is hard, and rare among people.

In a relationship with God, God is never the offender, it is always the human being. One way of viewing God's grace is from the perspective of such a broken situation, only in this case, God has freely taken the estrangement, upon Himself, in such a way that the break . . . is healed. God does this freely because in love the relationship is valued more than justice . . . As it is put in the Letter of James, "mercy triumphs over judgment."

This aspect of God's nature, we might call it, "love acting in freedom," is revealed to us in Jesus, who is God's Son," dying a sacrifice . . . *for us*. It was revealed in the time of Noah, when humanity was saved in an Ark, and in the exodus when the Israelites escaped servitude in Egypt, and in the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel when the remnant, as it was

called, was allowed to return from exile, and in the time of Jesus, when it became clear that this divine sacrifice was for everyone.

It is this love and mercy, this liberation and forgiveness, and this satisfaction of life's meaning that is memorialized in the rainbow, anticipated in Lent, sought through humility and repentance, and celebrated at Easter time. And though it can be described in many ways, something like this message is the central conviction of the Christian Faith, and it rings like a symphony.

Symphony means, "together sound;" rhythms and counter rhythms, melodies and counter melodies, harmonies; a combination of sounds of different tones and qualities, all put together in a collection of sounds that transcends itself as the whole become more than the sum of the parts.

And ringing out over the din of the world, with its Fat Tuesdays everyday of the week, and its wars and shootings and constant bickering, and the failed attempts of believers to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God as they have been instructed, is the symphony of grace that overcomes all the obstacles, floods the space, and gives life back to the world.

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