

Message for the First Sunday of Lent: A One Way Promise

Do you know what I discovered when I started researching about this story of a great flood? That there are many cultures around the world that have flood legends, some stories even older than Noah's Ark story.

For example, the Babylonian's have a story about their water god Enki warning of great flood, so he builds a boat, saved his family, friends, plants, animals & precious metals. There are ancient Greek & Roman legends of their gods who saved their children and a collection of animals by boarding a vessel shaped like a giant box. And Irish legends; Queen Cesair and her court sailed for 7 years to avoid drowning when the oceans overwhelmed Ireland. And even North American native legends of a great flood. Interesting how world wide the story of a world-wide flood is!

Now today, we read just some verses of the biblical flood story, but to get the complete sense of it, including why there even was a flood, you need to go back and start the story from the beginning and that starts back in Genesis 3.¹ The issues begin almost immediately after humanity comes to God's amazing creation, it's really a story of the increasing disharmony among people and the sinfulness of humanity. And sinfulness is really humanity's falling away from God, our desire to do our own will instead of God's will for God's good creation. And we know that creation was good, because at the end of day six, "God saw that everything that God had made and indeed, it was very good." (Gen 1:31)

It isn't long before Adam and Eve gave into the temptation of wanting to have the knowledge of God, in other words they wanted to be their own gods, do their own thing—that's the crux of the story of Adam and Eve being thrown out of the garden of Eden. And there was some pretty intense disharmony in this first family, literally brother killing brother, Cain killing Abel. And over the generations it doesn't get any better, just worse and worse. So by the time of Noah's birth, 10 generations after Adam, sinfulness had run rampant;

This was no longer the creation God had intended, this was no longer 'very good', in fact was 'very bad'! Here's how the writer of Genesis describes it:

⁵The LORD observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. ⁶So the LORD was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart. (Gen 6: 5-6 nlt)

Humanity, those who were created in the image of God had totally turned away from their creator, and humankind was full of evil. How does God feel about this? Well, you might think God would be angry, and maybe feeling vengeful, God's good creation was a pit of sin and evil. But that's how people would respond, that's not how God responds. The Lord is sorry, God's heart is broken, for what was so very good has gone so very wrong. God grieves the loss of what his creation was meant to be: a "divine regret"² you could say.

¹²God observed all this corruption in the world, for everyone on earth was corrupt. ¹³So God said to Noah, "I have decided to destroy all living creatures, for they have filled the earth with violence. Yes, I will wipe them all out along with the earth! (Gen 6. 12-13 nlt)

God, the creator is cleaning up the horrors God's creation has turned into. God's starting again, cleaning up the garden you could say. Have you ever come across an old perennial flower bed, like on an abandoned farm, a garden that's been untended for a couple of generations. It's totally run amuck. Weeds have overrun it. The more invasive flowers, like those orange tiger lilies have taken over the bed and grown well beyond the garden edging, so it's hard to really see the boundaries of the original garden. Between the weeds and the lilies, they take most of the moisture and nutrition from

¹ Elizabeth Webb commentary on Gen 9.8-17 from working preacher.com Yr B Lent 1 2015

² ibid

the soil, so some of the less aggressive and more beautiful plants and flowers have simply succumbed, died out, as they couldn't compete. Others, maybe a bit stronger are tenaciously hanging on to a small piece of the garden, roots grown deep, but they're not thriving, just existing, trying to survive in the overcrowded and poor soil. Seed bearing flowers have spread their offspring across the entire lawn, and they're growing everywhere, taking over. And what does the gardener do? Well, you dig up the plants that you want to keep, set them aside in the shade, cover them to protect them and dig up the rest, turn those roots up and let them die. The wild seeded plants in the lawn get cut down until they too are gone.

That's kind of like what God, the master gardener of creation did. Gathered up what God wanted saved, set it aside, protected it, and destroyed that which invaded, destroyed and desiccated. God in fact re-created creation, started over, pushed the reset button, with a huge one time only world-wide flood.

And then God promises to never do that again, God establishes a covenant, like a sacred contractual agreement with the ones he saved, Noah, his family and the animals. To sign God's end of the contract, God hangs up his bow in the sky, an everlasting sign of God's promise to humanity. To the ancients, to hang up the bow meant the warrior was done killing, retired from war. Lightning was perceived as God's arrows, fired from God's mighty bow. So "the rainbow serves as a reminder not simply of the beauty of the earth after a rainstorm but of God's refusal ever again to take up the divine bow against humanity or the world."³

But you know what's interesting in this covenant, this contract? God is not asking anything in return from Noah and the family. If God had a lawyer, that lawyer would never have let God make that agreement! If we look at this like a legal document, humanity has the better deal. God has bound Godself to humanity and creation, but with no contractual obligations from humanity, the other party in the contract. Genesis 9:1; God says: *"I am confirming my covenant with you. Never again will floodwaters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth."*(nlt) God has most willingly put limits on Godself, but has not made any demands on humanity, to keep their side of the contract, the covenant.

God is now bound to the fate of God's creation, bound to humanity and all we do to God's creation. And we haven't been doing a great job, if we're honest. Why would an Ultimate Power want to do this, take such a risk? From our perspective, it doesn't make sense. But, it's the ultimate loving relationship. It's like when we love someone and enter into a relationship with that very special one. It is inherently self-giving, putting the needs of the one you love beyond your needs and desires; we willingly take that risk to ourselves out of love. Like parenthood, in a true and loving and healthy parental-child relationship, the parent sacrifices their own needs and wants for the good of their children; it's a sacrificial relationship.

Who else do we know put himself into that same situation? Ah yes, Jesus. "The self limitation and willingness to sacrifice divine freedom ... reaches (its) climax in the passion of Jesus Christ."⁴

And this is what Lent is all about, the annual reminder of the story of the sacrificial love of God and the journey of God's son, Jesus, as he gave his life in love for us. It's a 40 day journey of looking at ourselves within the bigger story as members of God's good creation, and thinking how we might want to consider responding to God's incredible and amazing love, and asking for forgiveness when we miss the mark. It's an opportunity to think about what we can do to bring the love of God in Christ back to God's good creation, in our little corner of God's world. Amen

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³ David J. Lose in Homeletic perspective for Gen. 9: 8-17 in Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 2 p. 29

⁴ Ibid, p 31