

February 14, 2016

1 Peter 3:16-22

Genesis 6:11-14, 17-22

Cleansed by the Flood Waters

The story of Noah and his ark and the terrible flooding of the world has become a tame story for us. Noah and his boat of gentle animals decorate nursery walls. We give our children wooden ark toys with a magical zoo of creatures to pack and unpack and sail across the living room floor. In our house, until recently, we had a plastic Noah's Ark, and Noah was a frog with a captain's hat and the animals served educational purposes having various colors and shapes and animal noises. But if you didn't know the story of Noah's Ark, you would wonder why all these animals were on a boat and why in the world was there a captain that looked like a frog.

To some, the story of Noah and his ark is just the story of a quirky zoo. But in the Bible, the story is quite different. It is not at all child-friendly. The great Christian author, Frederick Buechner writes: "this is really as dark a tale as there is in the Bible, which is full of dark tales. It is a tale of God's terrible despair over the human race and his decision to visit them with a great flood that would destroy them all, except for this one

old man, Noah, and his family...we give this story to children to read.

One wonders why.”¹ Frederick Buechner wonders if we make this a children’s story because so we can avoid what the story is really about.

It’s not about a zoo on a boat. It’s about God’s broken heart and God’s anger and God’s disappointment and God’s decision to flush humanity from the earth with a flood. This is about a God who will not allow evil or wickedness to destroy God’s beloved creation.

In the story of Noah, God cleanses the earth with a flood. And the waters of that terrible, sanitizing flood are, strangely enough, the same waters of our baptism. These waters are part of the same flood God sent to purify creation. And we cannot come to these waters as if they are safe.

As if these waters are not also the deep dark waters of judgment that sweep away all unrighteousness. Because these waters are kin to those waters. And yes, I know. That means these waters are not entirely child-friendly. But you and I know that these waters of baptism are not always

¹ <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-sprig-hope>

safe. As we meditate on our baptism during this season of Lent, let us meditate on these waters as the flood waters of Noah.

We start in Genesis with a God who loves creation, but that creation is in chaos. It is floundering. We meet Noah who is not a smiling cheerful old man on a nursery wall. This Noah, I imagine, is very grim. The world around him has gone to heck. Everyone is wicked and intent on doing evil, except for Noah. Imagine that commute to work. Imagine life with those neighbors. We are only six chapters into the Bible and already human beings are a disaster. Creation has all gone from bad to worse. From the Garden of Eden, to the snake and the fruit, to Adam and Eve's 'he said, she said' fiasco, to God having to kick them out of the garden, to all of their offspring turning out to be pretty crap-tastic. Humans are violent and corrupt. Violent and corrupt, Genesis repeats it like a mantra. Humans have figured out only one thing and that's how to be violent and corrupt, and they are corrupting and violating God's good creation, destroying what God made with love. And God has had enough. "Enough, God says. This is my creation and I've had enough of what you are doing to it." So God decides to wipe the slate clean and start

over again with creation; destroying all of humanity; except for Noah, who alone is righteous.

In the whole world. In all of God's creation, just one person is righteous.

On the one hand, those are terrible odds. Things look pretty hopeless and pointless. 99.9 percent of the world is evil. Only 1 person, Noah, is good. Maybe sometimes it seems our world is like that now. After watching the evening news. Or talking to our friends. Or reading our facebook feed. And hearing about the terrible violence and corruption out there. The massacres of Boko Haram or ISIL. The unrest in Afghanistan and South Sudan and North Korea. The horrible violence within our cities, within our schools, within our families. And the corruption. The corrupted drug companies. The corrupted investors. The corrupted politicians. Our corrupted sense of trust. It is enough to make you wish we could just stop and start all over again.

On the one hand, there's a world full of violence and corruption. But on the other hand, there's Noah, one person who is righteous, one who is not corrupt or violent, who does good rather than evil, who isn't in it for himself, but for God. 99.9 percent of the world is rotten. And yet there is

this one person who is not. Who has not been compromised. Who has not been swept up in the evil around him. Who has not shrugged his shoulders and thrown up his hands and said ‘if you can’t beat them, join them.’ Amazingly, miraculously, Noah is righteous.

On the one hand, there is global corruption. But on the other hand, there is Noah. Who listens to God and builds a ridiculous ship, and stocks it with all sorts of animals and works to save God’s creation. He brings his family on board a boxy boat for months and months and months with just a prayer that God is faithful and that things will be alright in the end.

On the one hand, there is the terrible mess of the world. But on the other hand, there is Noah.

In our Genesis story, the world that God loves has been overrun by corruption and violence. And God is heartbroken about it. God is grieving. God is sorry that God made humanity. This God of ours cares about creation. Unlike a distant Roman god. Or an unfeeling Babylonian god. This God, unlike any other, cares about the world that God created. And this God cares enough not to let it go on that way. This God so

LOVES the world. And so, God decides to wash away the violence and corruption of humanity.

This is what God must do. God must remove what is wrong so things can be made right again. God must get rid of evil so good can flourish again. So justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24) And so it is in baptism. So it is in these waters. God loves this creation, God loves us and so God gets rid of the evil in us and washes away what is wrong, the fear-driven anger, the hurt-driven violence, the corrupted insistence on our own way. In these flood waters, God cleanses us. And that baptism is active today. So what might God be cleansing for our lives? What counter-creational thing might God want to remove from us?

In Noah's flood, we hear about God's anger and disappointment. But we also see God's love. We see God wanting to start again. But after Noah's flood, God decides never again. God decides that God cannot respond to our violence with violence. God cannot use death to stop death. Never again, God promises. And God never will. Even though, we will continue to resist God. Even though we will continue to do evil. Even

though on the one hand, there is still suffering and corruption in almost every human heart. On the other hand, there is God's love. And there is Jesus Christ who pours out God's love. In baptism, we are flooded by grace. In baptism, everything in us is purified, John Calvin writes. All sin, all failure, all wrong within us is so deleted, covered, and effaced that they will never come into God's sight, never be mentioned, never imputed. (Institutes 4.15.1)

Jesu came not to bring a divinely sanctioned flood of rage and destruction. But to pour out his life and wash away our hatred with love. 99.9 percent of world was against him. 99.9 percent was violent and corrupt. The world tried to get rid of him. It tried to remove him and his way of being. It tried to sweep him away with torture and humiliation and suffering. It tried to bury him in death. It tried to bury him in the depths of the grave. On the one hand, there is all this powerful, overwhelming evil that has bent humanity and turned us to unrighteous violence and corruption. But on the other hand, there is Jesus. And Jesus endured the flood of our anger. The flood of our disappointment. The flood of our hatred. Jesus was faithful in

righteousness, in God's righteousness, in God's love. And Jesus did this, it says in the letter of 1 Peter, to bring you to God. He withstood the flood of humanity's evil; our rage, our hurt, our fear. And then he washed all of that away with forgiveness. He washed away our unrighteousness with mercy, in order to bring us back to God. He poured out his own life to bring us back to life. To bring us back to love.

In January our Life Group watched a video series on gun violence called Trigger. It had interviews with people whose lives had been affected by gun violence. And one thing that washed over me during the program and our discussions, is how I live in that safe children's Bible story world. And violence is something that happens far away. It interrupts me from places like Columbine and Sandy Hook and Ft Hood. But this video and discussion was like a tidal wave of the everyday violence out there that is destroying God's good creation. People who live in unsafe neighborhood. Kids who can't walk to school or be out in their front yards because of gangs. On the video, they interviewed a middle school counselor and she talked about how stressful it was for the kids who have to live like this. How hard it is to learn. How hard it is to succeed

with the fear of all that violence. Just before the Super Bowl, there was a story on TV about a high schooler in Knoxville TN, Zaezion Dobson, who was killed in a drive-by shooting. He was protecting three girls on a porch, shielding them with his own body. He gave his life for them. And this is not how God made things to be. This is not how life is meant to be for our boys. For our children, God's children. Where is the justice that rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream? Where is the baptism of God's great love to flood the world with grace? On the one hand, there is so much evil. But on the other hand, I am just one person. What could one person do?

We have been baptized by the love of God. Baptized into the cleansing life and death of Jesus. That sweeps away corruption and violence. That will not let us destroy ourselves or the world around us. We have been baptized in that love. And may that baptism remove all that is between us and God. Let it wash away all that is unrighteous or impure. Let it take away all that is fearful or hateful or resentful. Let the flood of Christ's love poured out, bring us to God and make us new.