

Day of New Beginnings

sermon digest

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Genesis 6:5-13, 17-19; 9:1, 9-17

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She had a routine. Every day was the same. She came in from school, picked up the cup of juice and cookies waiting for her and headed for the small plastic ark in the corner. Pair-by-pair she began sorting the animals. The large mammals first, followed by the apes and domestic animals and then the smaller creatures and birds and finally the things that slide and slither. Day after day she methodically lined them up and then began marching them up the ramp to the ark. Watching her in her endeavor and remembering the disheveled and frightening state of her appearance alongside her mother when they first appeared at the shelter, Pastor Patrick Willson wondered if she even knew the story behind the ark and toyed with the idea of sharing it with her. Given the violence and turmoil she had known in her short life, he thought better of it. How could he burden her with the story of an angry God who had wiped out all of creation. The drowned world of Genesis was too realistic. It echoed the environment from which she had come: Go ahead! Throw the frying pan across the kitchen when the pork chops burn—you'll feel better for it!

Instead, he sought to engage her in a lighter, less threatening conversation. "Where are the animals going?" he asked her.

She looked at him as if his question was absurd. "They're going home!" she responded. What could be more obvious? Home is where animals want to be. Home is where all of God's creatures long to be. Her tone made something else clear, Willson thought. This place was not home. It was clean, well lighted, and the meals were thoughtfully prepared. Although she had received new blue jeans and clean socks and no one hurt her there, it still was not home.

Had the little girl ever known home, Willson wondered? The intake interview with her mother had revealed she had spent four months with the last man, two months living with an aunt, somewhere else before that, years lost in the haze of her mother's addiction. What kind of home had she ever known? How could she hope for something she had never known except for its aching absence?

The next day, approaching the little girl who was busied again with staging the animals, Willson picked up the conversation: "You say the animals are going home. Where is their home?"

Without lifting her eyes from her task she answered. "God."

"Oh, you mean God will give them a home?"

"No, God will be their home."

"The rhinos teeter for a second at the top of the ramp, then clatter into the hold. A pair of warthogs come next, followed by a couple of antelope, until the whole double line of creatures rests safely in the ark. The ship is setting sail. It pulls away from the dock. The destination is God. They are going home" [*Christian Century*, Feb 2-9, 1994, 9].

If we are honest—and this is a point about which we usually have no trouble being honest—the story of Noah and the flood bothers us—a lot. If we had our druthers, we would prefer it was not in the Bible at all. Despite the imaginative setting of the ark and all of the animals marching in two-by-two, despite the pretty rainbow and the dove, it is a story about the deaths of innocents (as well as the guilty) at the hand of God. Although it has inspired cute children's toys and playground equipment, it isn't a story we are anxious to share with children. Patrick Willson's story, however, may very well recapture the story's meaning. The story is not finally about water and boats or even Noah. The story is about God. It is about a monumental moment of change in the perception of who God is and who God will be. It represents a change in Israel's theology about God—a change which will be significant in the church's theology about God as well.

God is moved by Creation's suffering. The story of a devastating flood is told repeatedly in ancient literature, particularly in civilizations located in the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Israel may well have picked the story up during the Babylonian exile; and indeed, the two traditions woven together in Genesis to tell the flood story come from that era. Although no archeological or geological evidence points to a worldwide flood, a particularly serious Mesopotamian flood around 3000 may be in the background. Treating the stories as if they present historical detail, however, is off base. The myths that grew up around the floods detailing the roles of the gods of the various regions represent an effort to make sense of tragedy in familiar terms. Ages long efforts to locate the ark on Mt. Ararat, however, are, in Walter Brueggemann's words, "a doubtful enterprise" at best. The Genesis story "is not concerned with historical data but with the strange things which happen in the heart of God that affect God's creation" [*Genesis: Interpretation*, 74].

Brueggemann would turn us back from another fallacy as well. Claiming that the story is "just a myth", which like those of every other culture, seeks to give expression to the fractured and threatened nature of

the cosmos, is also inadequate. The Genesis flood story is not a universal statement “but a peculiarly Israelite statement in the categories of covenant” [75]. It is not a statement about the world in isolation unto itself. It is a statement about the world and what God has done, is doing, and will do on behalf of the world.

The story depicts an incongruity between a hopeful creation in which God willed unity, harmony and goodness, only to be met with humankind’s resistance. With deep pathos, the writer notes that God “was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart” (6:6). Rather than an angry tyrant, Brueggeman insists, the God depicted here is more the troubled parent who grieves over alienation from a child. God is not angered but grieved; not enraged, but saddened. God does not stand against but with creation. And most touching, the same word used to depict the pain bequeathed to women in childbirth (3:16) is now experienced by God. The crisis of focus, then, is not the flood but “the heavy, painful crises in the dealings of God with creation.” The story is centered upon the grief of God. “God is decisively impacted by the suffering, hurt, and circumstance of his creatures. God enters into the world’s ‘common lot’” [78].

God is a God who creates new beginnings. God makes the covenant promise of “never again”—never again to destroy humankind and every living creature upon earth. God chooses to take on suffering in the face of human sin and evil rather than annihilation. God determines, in the words of Terence Freitheim, “to take suffering into God's own heart and bear it there for the sake of the future of the world. The cross of Jesus Christ is on the same trajectory of divine promise” [Luther Seminary, Mar. 1, 2009].

God opts, in other words, on the side of the God Israel proclaims as the God who is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” God opts to open a future with hope. Taking into account the probability that much of the story of Noah and the flood was contemporaneous with the writing of Second Isaiah, the similarities of their messages of hope and homecoming emerging in the midst of chaos are significant. Just as Isaiah pointed across the desert to returning home from exile, the flood story moves beyond its dismal story of pain to the emergence of new possibilities of faithfulness even within the present world. The covenant God offers in the sign of the rainbow is not conditional (if you do this, then I’ll do that). It is unilateral—sheer promise—I will see and remember you.

So, the Lenten tradition of turning to the story of the flood fits well. It speaks volumes of the violence, the brokenness, the evil and tragedy that we know every day stalk our earth. But it speaks, too, of the God who is in here with us—not safely ensconced somewhere in the sky far away, but in the midst of it all with us and also with *them*—with those who seem not have a prayer of hope on earth. It speaks of the child whose life is blighted by an addicted parent, the child who scraps for every bite of food that goes into her mouth, the family ripped apart by a father’s deportation, and the terror of those caught in the onslaught of war. It speaks to us in the midst of personal pain, failure and loss. It speaks to us of a future that draws us forward to invest the best of our energies in healing pain and opening the future to new beginnings of wholeness and community.