

Sermon: The Great Healing
Text: Genesis 9:8–17
Date: July 3, 2016
Context: WWPC
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*I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant
between me and the earth.*

Genesis 9:13

We opened our service this morning with a beautiful call to worship centered on the cleansing and restorative properties of water. And that's an entirely appropriate thing to do.

Water is a wondrous element. You step into a shower after a hot day working in the garden. You're covered in dirt and sweat going in, and minutes later you emerge feeling reborn. It's a kind of everyday miracle we've all experienced.

On the sacred end of the spectrum we are baptized in water, sealed with a sign of the covenant and welcomed by it into God's own family.

But as the residents of West Virginia can tell you, water can also be a dangerous thing. Floods in particular are terrifying events, as anyone who's ever been in one can attest. And there is nothing cleansing or restorative about them. When they recede, they leave entire towns, entire families, buried under a deathly blanket of toxic, foul-smelling mud.

Which is what makes the so-called story of Noah and the flood so very tricky. It's a dangerous story about a calamitous event.

Or is it? Sometimes it feels like we have completely domesticated this story. We think of the animals – and the people, too, for that matter—marching two by two into safety in the ark.

We think of the ark itself bobbing out there on the storm-tossed waves for forty days and forty nights, a buoyant little cork floating happily on a vast ocean, and we think of the rainbow at the end.

We don't think about the terror of those massive waves, or the sea sickness and the nausea, or the stink of the animals, or about the horrors of what's happening beneath those towering waves.

Perhaps of necessity, we have reduced this powerful and often disturbing story to what amounts to a Readers Digest version, suitable for children. But in fact this story is among the longest and most complex stories in the Bible.

It starts in the 6th chapter of Genesis with God in an ugly mood. The Creator sees the pervasive wickedness humanity, notes the destruction we have visited on the earth, and regrets having made us. Then in a fit of divine rage, the Almighty unleashes a catastrophic flood upon the earth to wipe the slate clean.

Mercifully this story does not end there. As with all good narratives, the characters are changed by the events of the story. In this case, God ranks, chiefly and surprisingly, among the characters who is the most changed.

When the story finally ends three full chapters later, the angry, regretful God, the God bent on destroying virtually all life on earth, has had a change of heart and a change of mind. God has, in effect, repented. That's the actual word used in the text. God repents.

Once bent on global destruction, God realizes how very precious all of life is, including us rascally humans. In that moment the destroyer's anger turns to compassion, and with that compassion comes a promise — the first great covenantal promise in the Bible, to be faithful to us forever.

But not just to us.

Just as the waters are about to rise, God commands Noah, "of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you . . . two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive."

In effect, this is a story about divinely mandated species preservation in a time of rapidly rising global water levels, and of humanity's role in saving those species. Let me say that again, this is a story about divinely mandated species preservation in a time of rapidly rising global water levels.

And people think the Bible is no longer relevant today. But that's not where the relevance of this story ends, with regard to the world as it is today.

Last week I noted that the idea, the concept, of Original Sin is foreign to the Old Testament. In the creation account given to us earlier in Genesis, humanity has lost its innocence but we are not fallen, not as Christians understand that word. As a species, we are not inherently evil, at least not per the theology of the Old Testament.

But make no mistake: we are not good. Just three chapters after Adam and Eve are banished from Eden, human beings have not only populated the earth, we have effectively ruined it.

One can't help but wonder if God might be feeling a little bit that same way now. Whether the Creator sees the pervasive wickedness humanity, notes the destruction we have visited on the earth, and regrets having made us.

But if you're wondering if the world might not be ripe for another round of divine judgment, I would not recommend building an ark. Not least because I don't think that's the point of this story.

I saw a FB post earlier this week in which an self-avowed atheist took the time to mock a creationist group for trying to do just that: namely, build a replica of Noah's ark.

This person noted that the creationists were using large cranes and other heavy machinery to accomplish their goal, and spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process.

He pointed out, more than a little smugly, that these dim-witted fundamentalists appeared not to catch the irony of this project --- that if they needed to use heavy machinery and thousands of dollars to build this boat, did it not ever occur to them to wonder how Noah manage to pull off this feat before powers saws and overhead cranes appeared on the earth?

I have to confess this is one of my all-time biggest pet peeves: When atheists like this man go out of their way to mock all people of faith for believing, as Bill Mahar has put it, in bronze age myths, as if every man who goes to church leaves with his knuckles scraping the ground, dragging his woman behind him by her hair.

I always want to point out that because we have faith doesn't necessarily mean we read the Bible literally, like it's a scientific textbook.

More to the point, I always want to ask, have you ever heard of stories? Don't you have any of your own—the time your Aunt Margie beat cancer against all odds, even when the doctors effectively said she was doomed?

The time a dam broke above your home town, leaving the town itself in ruins and sending some 240 people to their deaths. And how an army of volunteers began to arrive the very next day, materializing as if out of nowhere, as if they were sent straight from heaven with just one job: to help a whole community buried under a deathly blanket of toxic foul-smelling mud, to shed that blanket and to begin to rise from the dead.

Don't you have those stories? I want to ask. Don't you yourself believe in them?

They may not. But I do. I've got a whole library of them from my own life, including my own flood story, how on a dark night, full of terrors, my dad performed super human feats to keep me alive. My personal messiah.

Indeed, I've got a whole book full of these stories – we've got a whole book full of them – and, yes, that book is called the Bible.

That's what I want to say to them. We don't read these bronze age myths to figure out how to build airplanes or arks, or how to treat leukemia.

We read them because our world is still filled with floods and and giants and pharaohs. We read them so that we might be inspired to rise to meet these these challenges as our forefathers and foremothers in the faith did.

However. This is not to say that all stories, even the stories in the Bible, are always inherently redemptive, or exempt from tough minded critique.

Especially nowadays.

In her wonderful book *The Luminous Web* Barbara Brown Taylor notes how so many of our stories today divide us. This is what it means to be an American, or an Israeli or a Palestinian. This is what it means to be a Christian or a Jew or Muslim.

These national and religious and family stories divide us as often as they unite us. Cowboys vs. Indians. Hatfields vs. McCoys. White police vs. black teen-agers. Bernie supporters vs. Trump supporters. Bernie supporters vs Hilary supporters for that matter.

It feels to most of us like these divisions are becoming more and more acute. Indeed, some of them are even serving as grounds for violence.

But not this story. The story of Noah and the flood is, finally, about the whole human family and the ties that bind us. And it is a story about the promise of peace.

It is about a promise made to a primordial world, a world before there were Jews or Muslims or Christians, certainly before there were Americans or Israelis or Palestinians.

When the whole human family was tied together by the shared genetic cords of Adam and Eve and Noah and his wife. A promise made when all of life was held together in a luminous web of biology and grace.

And it's the first promise of many. The promise of peace to Noah and to all creation. The promise to Abraham and Sarah to make of them a nation and to bless the world through them.

The promise of the Law to Moses. And, finally, the promise of a Child to Mary, and through him, the promise of a new covenant, with love, rather than law, at its center.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "They are all the same promise, at heart – the promise of an intimate relationship with God – but the promise has taken different forms over the years, as God has struggled to remain faithful to the orneriest bunch of partners a deity ever had" (*Gospel Medicine*, pg. 31).

All of these covenants are proof that God has bound God's own being to the world. If there is pain in the world, God has promised, by contract, to share in it.

To be faithful to the orneriest bunch of partners a deity has ever had. To be in solidarity with us. To meet our worst tendencies, tendencies which Jesus himself experienced, with forgiveness and compassion. To tie us back together again when

these cords fray, and then to continue to hold us together in that luminous web of biology and grace.

That's God's side of the bargain anyway. And God has kept that promise, even though we appear not to have learned much in the centuries since about how to get along, or how to care for the creation God has entrusted to us.

Bombs in airports and mass shootings in night clubs and in elementary schools. Catastrophic floods and rising seas levels, caused by our changing climate. The explosion of hate and racism and xenophobia here at home and around the world.

It's actually an old story, driven by the corruption of human beings. And it's the story every news agency in the world exists to tell.

So if this story is causing your faith to fault or your hope to wane, it might be worth tuning out the news for a bit and tuning in to other voices.

In closing I want to lift up one of those voices for us today, for it points to a different way, to a return to the way of peace and reconciliation.

It comes from a truth-teller and a prophet of great vision. His name is Leonard Peltier. He happens to be a Lakota elder, but his language echoes that prophets of scripture.

On this July 4th Sunday, and in the middle of a tumultuous election year, I invite you to hear this prophetic proclamation, taken from his book, *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sundance*:

“Democracy means difference, not sameness. Allow [my people] our differences as we allow you yours. We don't conflict with each other; we complement each other.

“We need each other. Each of us is responsible for what happens on this earth. We are each absolutely essential, each totally irreplaceable. Each of us is the swing vote in the bitter election battle now being waged between our best and our worst possibilities.

“How are you going to cast your all-important ballot?

“We must each be an army of one in the endless struggle between the goodness we are all capable of and the evil that threatens us all from without as well as from within.

“To heal will require real effort, and a change of heart, from all of us. To heal means that we will begin to look upon one another with respect and tolerance instead of prejudice, distrust, and hatred.

“We will have to teach our children – as well as ourselves – to love the diversity of humanity. To heal we will have to make a conscious effort to live as the Creator intended, as sisters and brothers, all of one human family, caretakers of this fragile, perishable, and sacred Earth.

“We can do it. Yes, you and I and all of us together. [We *can* do it!] Now is the time. Now is the only possible time. Let the Great Healing begin” (*My Life is My Sundance*, pg. 209.)

Amen!