

Lent 2A: Genesis 9
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
March 5, 2023

Grief and Grace in the Flood

The Devil came to God one day dejected and complained, "Almighty God -- I want you to know that I am bored, bored to tears! I go around with nothing to do all day long. There isn't a stitch of work for me to do!" "I can't understand you," replied God. "There's plenty of work to be done, only you've got to have more initiative. Why don't you try to lead people into sin? That's your job!" "Lead people into sin!" muttered the Devil. "Why Lord, even before I can get a chance to say a cursed word to anyone, they have already gone and sinned all by themselves!"

Sometimes it seems that way, doesn't it? Like we don't need any help from the Devil, because we can sin perfectly well all by ourselves. I mean, you only have to look at the news today—homicides up 40 percent in many cities, people dying in record numbers of drug overdoses, immigrant children being exploited in factories here in America, carjackings, thefts, assaults are a daily occurrence, homeless people left to rot on the street, or killed by the mentally ill. I read recently about a young mother who was shot and killed over in a parking lot dispute! It all seems pretty scary right now!

Reading the headlines, one can be forgiven for wondering if we haven't returned to the state of the world before the flood. You know, the story from Genesis, from the Bible's primeval history—Noah and the ark... Well, just before that deluge, Genesis says, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." I imagine God looking down on the world, as a teacher stepping into an unruly classroom, "No, stop, put that down. Where did you get that? No, that doesn't go there! You really shouldn't do that. Wherever did you come up with *that* idea?"

God, Genesis tells us, was so horrified at the state of things, at the corruption of his good creation, that he felt he must take drastic action. Things have gotten so bad, the wickedness, the *bloodthirstiness* had gotten so out of control, there was only one thing to do—cleanse the world of the wickedness of humanity, by cleansing it of humans. So God let loose a great flood: "all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The waters swelled above the mountains, nearly up to the sky."

This story of the flood seems so fantastic, so theatrical, that it's easy to dismiss it as a fairy tale—a great flood covered the *entire* earth, killing *everything*? That just strains belief. Except that many cultures from around the world have stories of a great flood too, which suggests a shared experience. In many of these other versions, the flood is seen as divine punishment. According to the Babylonian story of Gilgamesh, for example, it was because the gods got angry when they couldn't sleep for all the noise humans were making below. In the Biblical story, however, the flood isn't portrayed as a punishment. In fact, nowhere in the story is God even described as angry. No, the primary emotion God expresses is grief: God says "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping

things and birds of the air, for *I am sorry that I have made them.*” That is a dreadful statement: “I regret even making them.” That’s like when your parent says, “I’m disappointed in you.” It’s so much worse than their being angry. Their disappointment cuts to the heart. So, no, God doesn’t send the flood out of anger, as punishment, but rather out of resignation. His good creation had been ruined—humanity and even the animals were tearing each other apart. There was nothing to do but start over. Wipe the slate clean and re-start. It’ll be “Creation 2.0.”

That was God’s plan to solve the problem of wickedness and violence—a re-creation, a do-over. Except that as the waters receded, God acknowledges that the flood didn’t solve anything. God declares “never again.” But in the next breath, God said, “for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” That was the same thing God said at the beginning of this story. Nothing was changed. A worldwide flood drowned all life not on the ark, and afterward we are back to where we were, just before the flood. Well, not quite.

God recognizes now that human wickedness cannot be removed just by removing wicked people. The wickedness and violence will persist in the hearts of whoever’s left. It’s part of our fallen human nature. There’s no changing it. Yet, their bloodthirstiness can be contained, constrained, curbed. Limitations need to be established so that the whole of the created order doesn’t unravel.

This brings us to this morning’s reading. Here we see God’s plan for preserving the recreated order. The plan is two-pronged: procreation and the protection of life. “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth,” God declares to Noah and his sons. After the death and destruction wrought by the waters, it’s fitting that God’s thoughts immediately turn to repopulation. So too the next bit of instructions, about the shedding of blood. God gives humans every animal, as well as every plant, to eat as food. Only they are not to eat the blood of an animal. Nor are they permitted to kill another human, on penalty of death. Thus the new life will be preserved.

These commands seem pretty straightforward. Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth. Eat animals, but not their blood. If someone kills a human, then they shall be killed. As far as ethical directives go, these commands seem pretty minimal. And yet their implications are profound.

You see, God gives these commands, but in order to accomplish them, much more is needed. Follow me here. In order for humans to “be fruitful and multiply,” they need not only to have children but also to nurture them, so that they survive into responsible adulthood and can have children of their own. And the goal of spreading throughout the world, “filling the earth,” means adapting to new conditions presented by the geography--coastlands, forests, steppes, deserts, mountains. They will need to develop the right kinds of clothing, housing, and tools, which requires creativity and technological innovation. The second command gives plants and animals to eat as humanity spreads out. On the face of it, this seems undemanding—eat whatever you like. Except when you realize that God’s not talking about shopping at the supermarket. It’s easy for us in today’s wealthy societies to take food for granted. But for most of human history, just getting enough food to survive was an arduous task. Animals need to be hunted. Plants need to be found and collected. They both need to be prepared before being eaten. And then as human populations grow, crops will need to be cultivated and livestock raised. That’s a lot of work. The final command of God, the prohibition against shedding the blood of humans, and the command for retribution against those who shed blood seems similarly straightforward, if a little

harsh...until you think through what would be entailed to bring justice against those who harm fellow human beings. The administration of justice is not automatic. There needs to be institutions and systems of justice to determine what sorts of harmful conduct needs redress, to resolve conflicts and to enforce appropriate penalties and remedies.

These three commands may *seem* modest, but there is a lot entailed in them! They all require communal activity. In order to nurture children, explore new places, develop new technologies, acquire sufficient food, and establish justice, humans will need to work together. Strangers who meet in the wilderness can cooperate briefly without formal agreements. But to work in coordinated ways towards mutually shared goals—like on a hunting expedition or repelling a group of raiders—for that, people have to develop customs and organizations—such as, the institution of family, to raise kids; enterprise associations, to explore, farm, build and innovate; and political community, civic society, in order to execute justice and make decisions together. Again these commands look modest, but if we step back, we see the very elements of civilization are being established here.

You're probably thinking I'm reading way too much into these verses, making a mountain out of a molehill. But when you consider what was necessary for life after the flood, the need to reestablish creation, it makes sense. I mean, life before the flood was a disaster. That was the "state of nature"—a state Tennyson described as "red in tooth and claw," what Thomas Hobbes called a state of "war of all against all." Where "might made right," where the strong could take what they wanted and the weak had to make do with what was left over. That couldn't continue, but it couldn't be entirely solved either. It could, however, be ameliorated, the destruction could be limited, by laws and institutions.

We don't much appreciate this fact today, the genius of institutions like the family, business and industry, education and civil society, the justice system, police, courts, etc. We have all become well aware in recent years of instances of abuse among these institutions, instances made all the more scandalous by media attention, to the point that some in our society think it best to just tear down those institutions, get rid of them. To be sure, no institution is perfect or immune from corruption or abuse. But without them, without the institutions we have developed, the social organizations that flow from God's commands, we would be back to where humanity was before the flood, back to anarchy, lawlessness, and death. Civilization—laws, customs, institutions, arts and sciences—these are not just things that separate us from the animals; they are what stand between us and annihilation, as a bulwark against the flood of human wickedness.

But the new world order established after the flood rests not only on God's commands but also on God's covenant, which is the other half of our first lesson. In the covenant, God makes this solemn promise to Noah and his sons: "I establish my covenant with you, that *never again* shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood." And God points them to the rainbow in the sky, as a sign of God's promise, a pledge that, what just happened will never happen again!

Notice though, God doesn't say, "I will never again send a flood *because I know you have all learned your lesson.*" Or "I'm done with that now, but from now on *you must do as I say.*" No, that's not what God says. God's promise here is unconditional, independent of human action. The commands God just issued are indeed important for the future of human life on earth, but

they are not requirements for God's mercy. God knows humanity doesn't deserve this promise, and he knows full well we are not going to be perfect people. I mean, not just the news but our own lives—our selfishness, anger, negligence, and hard-heartedness—they all show why God might be tempted to break that promise. Thankfully, then, the story of our world after the flood isn't about humanity's goodness, our ability to follow the rules, but rather God's great goodness. Graciously, the continued existence of life on our planet does not depend on human decisions and actions, but on God who continues to make and keep promises to people, even when we don't keep ours.

That's why the story of the flood situates God between grief and grace. Both grief and grace are responses to human sin. But in the end, grace speaks the last, best word. God is not going to stop being offended and grieved by sin. But, following the flood, it is grace that's going to lead the way. Here, we see it in God's commitment to the preservation of creation, but soon we will see it in creation's redemption. Here God realizes he cannot restore the world by wiping out sinful humanity. But soon he will find a way to heal the world by healing us, through the cross. The cross is ultimately where all the grief and grace of God meet in a startling way one dark Friday afternoon on a hill far away. It is there that all the pain and grief over sin are answered with the grace of Jesus' sacrifice for the sin of the world.

Grief and grace. Both are God's responses to our sin, but from now on it is grace that will lead the way. The story of the flood is a horrible story, because it shows how horrible we can be to one another. But the good news is that, no matter how horrible we can be, God is even more gracious. Thanks be to God.