



“Something To Hang On To”

Genesis 9:8-17

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The story of Noah and the flood is a wonderful and terrible story. God floods the world. Global apocalypse. If I saw it on CNN I'd change the channel! But for some reason this story has gotten told and retold through the ages, claimed and loved by children and adults alike.

Most of us grew up reading and hearing the stories in Genesis as literal. They happened and they happened just the way the Bible say they did. And some of us still believe they're literal, although we may acknowledge, sometimes grudgingly, that the authors may have put their own spin on them. Others of us have started to read them as metaphor, parable or myth; and for some of us, as soon as I say the word 'myth' I can hear you in your mind saying, "Hey, wait minute! You're talking about the Bible here!"

Bible scholar and theologian Marcus Borg, who died this past January, talks about how a story can be true without being literal – without ever actually having happened. Remember Lake Woebegone? All the stories Garrison Keillor tells week after week on the radio – Did they really happen? No, he makes them up. Are they true? We they are for some of us. When we hear them, we hear the truth in them. We recognize the people he's talking about. More importantly, we recognize ourselves.

When Dr. Renita Weems -- speaker, writer, scholar, and ordained minister – taught Old Testament Studies at Vanderbilt, she would begin every introductory class by saying, "This is not a course on what God said; this is a course on what the ancient Hebrews said God said." Then on Sundays she'd find herself standing in front of the congregation saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening." She would stand there, she says, "feeling naked as bark." Whatever that means.

Maybe that's how we should feel. If this story – or any other Bible story – strips us naked, makes us feel vulnerable, frustrated and confused, that's not really a bad thing, is it?

A few years ago, I heard about a mother who had lost her son in a tragic accident and she was desperately trying to make some sense out of what happened. She said that all she could figure was that God wanted to bring her son home. He was eleven.

We hear that kind of thinking all the time. I was at a funeral for a young man and the pastor himself said that his death was a "wake-up call from God." I think I visibly cringed when I heard him say that.

One of the medieval German mystics, Gertrude the Great, in one of her visions asks Jesus what he thinks of the fact that some of the sisters in her monastery were often afraid to receive communion because they were concerned about what God would do to them if they weren't prepared well enough. Jesus' plaintive answer to her was, "I wish that my people would not think me so cruel."

Our churches are filled with grieving Christians who sit there cowering and confused -- trembling before the God of their childhood who they think has hurt them, tested them, or punished them 'for their own good.'

What a great phrase: "I wish that my people would not think me so cruel." I hear it in my head every time someone starts talking like that, along with Jesus' wonderful words about how God sends the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. Which means, God doesn't cause bad things to happen to people.

But when that grieving mom was pouring out her heart, desperately trying to make some sense of the loss of her boy, we have to see that the only thing she was able to hang on to in that moment was that God is in control; surely God had some purpose in taking her child. She was hanging by a thread and it would be cruel to cut it.

Today's story was written during a time when the whole nation of Israel was hanging by a thread during the Babylonian exile. And like the Cherokee people on the trail of tears, the people of Israel had been snatched from their homes and forced to march to Babylon -- about 500 miles as the crow flies. They were facing a crisis of faith. Why would God do this? How could God let this happen? And maybe, like the grieving mother, all they could figure was that God must have wanted it to happen. Like that minister at the funeral, all they could figure was that God wanted to give them a wake-up call. Like countless people who have suffered over the centuries, they too figured God must be angry with them.

With that in mind let's turn back to our text. Almost every culture on the planet has some sort of similar ancient flood story. European explorers were surprised by Indian legends that sounded just like the story of Noah, and some Spanish priests worried that the devil had put those stories in the Indians minds to confuse them.

In one of my first classes on Hebrew Bible we studied the Babylonian version of the story written on tablets as far back as 2700 BCE, the "Epic of Gilgamesh." For them the flood was seen as a turning point in the history of mankind. It was the moment when the gods and humanity broke up. You see before the flood the gods had been enraged by the noise made by humans that disrupted the gods' sleep. So they decided to destroy the world. Makes sense to me! I have these upstairs neighbors who like to have people over and teach them to tap dance and run relay races with the kids late into the night. I can't say that I never wished I could wipe them off the face of the earth! Or at least out of their apartment.

Anyway, one of the Gods arranged for his favorite human, Utnapishtim, to be spared. Afterwards, the gods saw the horrible devastation they had caused and were shamed, so the gods and the mortals parted company because, "it was clearly dangerous and undesirable for divine beings to meddle in mundane affairs."

You get the idea when listening to both stories that maybe they were right. Maybe it is dangerous and undesirable for the gods – or God – to be messing around in our business; it was in this case anyway. The flood story leaves us wondering who this God is who would destroy the earth, all human life, and the animals too. I've heard people say that it's a story about God growing up. At the beginning God is like a child building a sand castle: do it my way or I'll smash it down. Then God learns in the story; God makes mistakes, God grows, and God promises to behave.

The book of Genesis contains a lot of different ideas about what God is like. In the beginning, God is an all-powerful creator, wresting order out of chaos, dividing the water from the land. What could this God possibly ever need to learn? But in this story, God allows the chaos to resume control, UN separating the land from the water. Creator God becomes destroyer of worlds.

If, like me, you hold to the idea of Jesus, who taught us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, who said, "It is not the will of my father that any of these little ones should perish," – then, like me, you find this story pretty disturbing. But the people who lived back then, in the ancient world, knew that everything that ever happened was caused by God, or one of the gods. There were no natural catastrophes. Even today it kind of blows my mind that insurance forms still refer to tornados and floods as "acts of God."

I heard recently that the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia was caused by God so that more people could be saved. "Because they perished, many more will be saved from a Christless eternity..." So, having been closed to Christian witness for years, Indonesia, by necessity, and according to these people by God's design, began to allow all kinds of aid including missionaries and gospel tracts.

"I wish at my people would not think me so cruel."

As an interesting aside, in the Babylonian version, gods and humans were both overwhelmed when they saw the utter devastation wrought by the deluge. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim, the Noah of Babylon, recalled his anguish when at last he climbed out of his ark:

*...stillness had set in,
And all mankind returned to clay.
The landscape was as level as a flat roof.
I opened a hatch, and light fell on my face.
Bowing low I sat and wept,
Tears running down my face."*

Like many holocaust survivors, Utnapishtim wasn't thrilled that he'd been spared. On the other hand, Noah isn't nearly as distressed; he just seems relieved.

Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel talks a lot about the pathos, or deep feeling of God; saying, "The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos." In plain English, a prophet is somebody who can feel what God feels. In this story, I don't see that Noah feels the pathos of God; in fact, we don't even see God's pathos the way we would like.

But what we do see is the people of Israel, thousands of years ago, in their history's darkest hour, muddled and confused – angry about who and where God could be, were able to come out the other side, along with God in this story, affirming that they and God would continue to walk, even live together in relationship.

There's a story that one night in Auschwitz, some of the prisoners actually put God on trial. They found God guilty for allowing the Holocaust, and they condemned God to death. When the trial was over the Rabbi said, "It's time for evening prayers." They came out the other side determined to walk with God, and God with them.

"As for me," God said to the survivors, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. [\[a\]](#)¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth... I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

So unlike the Babylonian gods, who decided after flood to quit any involvement with the humans, we see a God who's determined to hang in there, through thick and thin, for better or worse, a God who wants to be involved with us humans – go figure! A god who covenants not just with humans, but with all the creatures on the earth, to start over and try again.

"God with us," you might say. And that's something to hang on to.

Amen.