

“God of the 2nd Chance: Noah”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Traditional Word

“And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘And I, I am about to establish My covenant with you and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the fowl and the cattle and every beast of the earth with you, all that have come out of the ark, every beast of the earth. And I will establish My covenant with you, that never again shall there be a Flood to destroy the earth.’ And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I set between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for everlasting generations: My bow I have set in the clouds to be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth, and so, when I send clouds over the earth,, the bow will appear in the cloud. Then I will remember My covenant, between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh, ad the waters will no more become a Flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud and I will see it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on the earth.’ And God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.’”

--Genesis 9:8-17 Trans. Robert Alter

Contemporary Word

A flood myth from the Caribbean/Antilles tradition:

The Master of Spirits, angered at the people for not giving the offerings due him, caused a heavy rain to fall for several days, drowning the people. Only a few survived, escaping by canoe to an isolated mountain. This flood separated the Carib's islands from the mainland and caused their present terrain.

A flood myth from the Venezuelan tradition:

The first people neglected Kuma the creator, so she made it rain until only one sand dune and one tree stayed above water. People escaped into the tree, but there were only leaves and rotten fruit to eat, and when people sat with their bottoms towards the water, a big fish would come by and bite them. A few of these people survived as humans, but Kuma turned the ones that ate leaves and rotten fruit into howler monkeys.

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PAGE ONE

My first real work with theology actually occurred when I was a boy of about 6 or 7. I remember very well a lesson we learned in Baptist Training Union one Sunday down there in Derby, America, where we were treated to the traditional version of the story of Noah. You know the one—God is angry with the sinful nature of humankind and decides to send a flood to wipe out all of humanity and start over with “good” humans. While God was busy planning how to accomplish this, God noticed one human family that might be spared. Noah—and his wife, sons and their families. I remember being told of all of the “bad” folks who were to perish in the great deluge. I remember the pictures of the ark with the animals being led two-by-two onto it and I remember, very well, that this was the first time I actually got angry with God. When Training Union was over I marched into my house and right up to my mother and I exclaimed, in no uncertain terms, that I was mad at God because why would this God that I’ve been told over and over and over loves me very much—why would this God destroy the world. It just didn’t make any sense. Fortunately, my mom understood my frustration and she carefully redirected my attention to the moral of the story—that God promised God would never again flood the world again like this and that the rainbow serves as a reminder that this won’t happen again. My young mind appreciated the distraction, but I’ve often returned to this thought in my

life, especially, as you can imagine, during my seminary training. I appreciate the rainbow very much, but, it still bugs me—why would God destroy what God had worked so hard, well—six days—to create? Let's see what I discovered...

PAGE TWO

I had an interesting time researching flood myths and stories from around the world for this morning's sermon. I found hundreds of stories from all over the world that are similar to our own Hebrew Bible story of Noah and the flood. It seems that pre-scientific peoples felt compelled to come up with some sort of explanation for why natural disasters occurred. Almost every culture and civilization in the history of the world has a flood myth—and most of them have a deity rewarding the pious and punishing those who sin. These myths serve as a useful tool for controlling human behavior—who wants their bad act to be the reason the entire community is destroyed in a flood?

The Ancient Roman poet Ovid, in his first book, tell us that the god Jupiter, angered at the evil ways of humanity, resolved to destroy it. He was about to set the earth to burning, but considered that that might set heaven itself afire, so he decided to flood the earth instead. With Neptune's help, he caused storms and earthquakes to flood everything but the summit of Parnassus, where Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha came by boat and found refuge. Recognizing their piety, Jupiter let them live and withdrew the flood. Deucalion and Pyrrha, at the advice of an oracle, repopulated the world by throwing "your mother's bones" possibly a reference to stones behind them; each stone became a person.

Or consider this interesting myth from the Sumerian tradition: The gods had decided to destroy mankind. The god Enlil warned the priest-king Ziusudra ("Long of Life") of the coming flood by speaking to a wall while Ziusudra listened at the side. He was instructed to build a great ship and carry beasts and birds upon it. Violent winds came, and a flood of rain covered the earth for seven days and nights. Then Ziusudra opened a window in the large boat, allowing sunlight to enter, and he prostrated himself before the sun-god Utu. After landing, he sacrificed a sheep and an ox and bowed before all his gods. Because Ziusudra had salvaged the animals and the seed of mankind, he was granted eternal life and taken to a new land, where the sun rises.

And then this story from western Zaire reminds us of the universality of the story—the core moral that a deity punishes those who would engage in violence or evil or turn their back on the stranger, widow, orphan and immigrant: An old lady, weary and covered with sores, arrived in a town and sought hospitality—this simple request was denied her at all of the homes she asked at except for the very last home she came to. They invited her and provided food, shelter and medicine. When she was well and ready to depart the town, she told her friends, who had provided hospitality, to pack up and leave with her, as the town was now accursed and would be destroyed by an angry god. The night after they had left, heavy rains came and turned the valley into a lake, drowning all the inhabitants of the town. The sticks of the houses can supposedly still be seen deep in the lake.

I even found a slightly naughty myth from the Inuit tradition, but it was a little to risqué for our Sunday morning together; however, if you're interested in Inuit pornographic mythology, I can send you a link to the story—it's rather fascinating.

I put a couple of other flood myths in your bulletins and also the entire part of the Hebrew Bible story that has to deal with the rainbow, which is also found, almost identically, in the Islamic Holy book, the Koran: I've included all of Robert Alter's beautiful language (which I believe captures the original Hebrew meaning and metaphor and nuance, better than most translations), and I'm not going to read it this morning, but we all know what happened --God made a covenant and caused the rainbow to appear to show that God would never again destroy humanity by a flood.

PAGE THREE

Much has been written about Noah's ark being a cautionary tale for humanity in our "second chance" at existence. And there are as many stories of second chances in our own lives and in the lives of others. On Dec. 26, 2004, Maria Belon was enjoying a book, poolside at a resort in Khao Lak, Thailand, while her three sons, Lucas, 10, Tomas, 8, and Simon, 5, splashed in the water. Belon, a physician, and her husband, Enrique Alvarez, were on Christmas vacation; they had spent the previous day exchanging and unwrapping their Christmas gifts to each other and were now enjoying that blissful state of having nothing to do but enjoy each other's company on vacation. In minutes their lives changed forever. Belon wrote this of the next few moments: "Suddenly we heard a horrible sound, like the sound of thousands of big planes, seconds later there was a black wall in front of us. I thought it was death. I

couldn't imagine it was water. It was a monster. The most horrible monster you can imagine."

Moments later the Belon-Alvarez family was swept apart by the torrential force of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. The family was cast into a lethal current swirling with fallen trees, debris and bodies. When the maelstrom finally spit her out, Belon was badly injured. She recalled: "My family was all gone. It was, 'Oh my goodness, I'm alive but I am alone.' The most horrible thing I could ever think of was being alive without them." But as she clung to a palm tree, she spotted her oldest son floating nearby. "When I saw Lucas, I thought, 'Okay, I have an incredible reason to be alive,'" Belon, says she gained strength from the souls of all those who had been plunged into the surf with her. "We were in the water struggling, and Lucas was screaming, 'We're going to die!' I could feel something incredible, and I said, 'We need to be courageous, we need to take care of each other, but we will not die.' Lucas was 10 years old, but he was very brave."

Her journey—now depicted in 2012 film *The Impossible*—is a tale of survival against all odds. The tsunami took over 230,000 lives in 14 countries, but somehow spared Belon's entire family, who found each other at a hospital after days of frantic searching. If you have never seen this movie, I highly recommend it. It's harrowing, but the humanity depicted and the way humans from all walks of life—all classes and castes—banded together to help one another is a powerful lesson for us all.

Maria Belon insists nothing special spared her life. She went on to explain: "There is no difference between me—a Spanish woman named Maria who is alive—and

thousands of moms who are under the sea. I do not deserve to be alive, but life is not fair. I feel pain and compassion for so many others who didn't come back up or lost the ones they love."

Belon spent four months in a Singapore hospital, where she battled infections and underwent 16 surgeries. Emotional healing took longer. The family slept with the lights on for six months; her youngest, Simon, had nightmares about monsters missing eyes. "When my husband found Simon, he was near two corpses—one without an eye," To help her son, she used a "magic" toy frog to "eat" his nightmares. "Every morning we drew his nightmares and put them in the frog's mouth. And every day I would [secretly] tear off a tiny bit of the paper." Gradually the bad dreams were made to disappear. "Some drawings were in there for a long time."

It took a year for the family to return to the sea. But now they gather at a beach every Dec. 26. "It is our family's birthday—our Thanksgiving," says Belon, who lives in Madrid with her husband (the boys have left the household and started their own lives)—the family promises to gather each year and remember the disaster: "No matter where we all are, this is a commitment we have forever. We need to be close to the souls [of the dead]." The water holds no terror for Belon now. Wherever she goes, she says she takes all those affected by the tsunami's power with her. Running a finger near a scar on her arm, she says, "My scars will be with me forever. My whole story is on my body. And it is wonderful because it means I am alive."

Think of your own flood myth—those times in your life when it seemed like everything was out-of-control—that your world was awash in troubles that seemed insurmountable—we often climb onto an ark of our own creation and cling to the Gopher wood walls and hang on tight until the storm abates. And think about those second chances in your own lives: after a heart attack, a major betrayal in a relationship, a long-lost friend returning into your life, another chance at a career you thought closed to you—all second chances that have been mentioned to me this week, by you, as I worked on this sermon. And think of the scars you now have—scars that are indeed wonderful—because they mean you are alive.

PAGE FOUR

I imagine the tsunami that shattered the post-Christmas peace of 2004 would have been seen by the people of Noah's time as divine retribution. Perhaps, a better theology of this story, for me anyway, is this: A pre-scientific people, who understood natural phenomena as signs of their God's pleasure or displeasure with human behavior, saw major meteorological and geological events as judgements upon their community. But we now know better...we know that things just happen. Tornadoes come, rains flood, oceans rise, and the earth cracks open. We live on a very violent planet—one that rages and thunders and spits and quakes. We now know these to be natural acts of this planet and not the capricious fits of a deity.

Ok, Paul, that's all well and good—but just where is God in all of this? I believe the Divine Presence is right beside us in all of these events. Ok, Paul—we get that—but what about this "Angry God"—one who punishes sinners and destroys the world.

Well, that one has always bothered me—that little boy in the Derby Training Union class was on to something—but what? One of my favorite stories from my seminary experience was the day in my Hebrew Bible class when the professor wanted us to discuss the idea of “An Angry God”. We spent a good part of the afternoon discussing what this meant—and the entire time I was holding forth that I couldn’t work with and for an angry God. The God of my understanding at that time was logical and would never get angry. Anger seemed to me to be beneath a Divine Presence. I said, “I think God is disappointed in us sometimes, but never angry” And that’s when my dear seminary friend, the now Rev. Sheridan Irick, turned to me and said: “So God was just disappointed in Sandy Hook?” She was challenging my notion that God was simply disappointed in the terrible events that unfolded that dark morning at Sandy Hook elementary school. And I was speechless. My perfectly logical argument against God ever being “angry” was thrown out the window, because of course God was furious that morning. God is furious anytime violence is perpetrated, but especially in such a heinous and cruel manner. At every act of barbarism, whether it’s on our southern border where families are ripped apart or down the street when an argument escalates into violence, God is angry and God weeps. God weeps with us and God is mad at us. But God didn’t cause it to happen—we are the hands and feet of God and we must engage with this God of our understanding and remedy violence—remedy poverty and disease—remedy ignorance. Co-create God’s beloved community here and now with the gifts and tools we have each been given.

What if, instead, this story of Noah and his ark is to remind us that bad things will happen to us and we might often find ourselves afloat on a metaphorical boat surrounded by flood waters while a storm rages—but, we must remember—the storm will subside, the waves will calm down, the boat will finally rest on dry land, and we will survive the deluge. Bad things are going to happen to us. That's life. Sometimes it's a great struggle to get out of bed in the morning and load up our ark and head out into the storm...but all of the while, the Divine Presence is right there with us—if only we would recognize it. And you know what else, this community is here for us as well. This church walks beside people all the time, during their trials and tribulations and this group of friends would board that ark with you—if you but let us.

I am always so humbled to be a part of this community and so proud of the knowledge that when called on, you are each there, ready to give a hand or an ear or a meal—and ready to be present with someone in the face of a great flood. I think maybe that's what the church is for—for all of our brilliant second chances. Second chances to maybe get it right.

Amen.

RESOURCES

Alter, Robert J. *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 1-The Five Books of Moses*. W.W. Norton and Company, New York, NY, 2019

<https://people.com/archive/maria-belon-the-impossibles-real-life-survivor-vol-79-no-2/>

<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/flood-myths.html>