

“Where to from Here?”  
February 21, 2021  
Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

If you're like me and grew up in or anywhere near the church, then you are probably familiar with the story of Noah and the flood. It is a staple of children's literature in Christian and Jewish settings. We also meet Noah in the Quran, so I suspect most Muslim children have also heard the story. In all that telling, though, I have to say I have never felt closer to this story than I do right now. Somehow a story about a natural disaster completely out of control that seems to go on endlessly is very relatable these days.

There are a lot of parallels between this story and ours during the last year. The arc of the narrative in Genesis has the water rising more and more, as the heavens are opened, until it reaches a peak and then it just sort of sits there, while all of life is wiped out, for about 150 days before the water begins to recede. And even then recovery comes in fits and starts. One bird is sent out and comes right back again. A little later another bird is sent out and comes back after a longer time, but carrying an olive branch. Finally a bird is sent out and never returns indicating that somewhere there is dry land.

This last year has sort of followed that pattern. Things got worse and worse for us, the infection numbers climbing, the death toll mounting, until it sort of reached a plateau and start to come down. But then it climbed again, getting even worse, until now it's starting to come down and there is the promise of protection in sight. The story of Noah makes it clear that God unleashes the flood but the reason is human misbehavior. In our case we still don't know exactly where the virus originated but, in our country at least, human behavior has only made it worse.

Historically, even though a flood story is common to cultures around Israel, our version probably became popular during the period of Israel's exile. The reality they faced was seeing their world come apart because they were overcome by a more powerful enemy, circumstances beyond their control. Surviving that trauma, making meaning of it, caused them to turn to their ancient tales and legends, to find a lens they could look through to view their circumstances. For them it was all about God and God's disappointment and regret.

We don't use the same lens today. We don't talk about the pandemic as God's punishment on us for our bad behavior. But much like the ancient Israelites who told these stories as they languished by the rivers of Babylon, we're faced with an absence of meaning that we need to overcome. This past year has been traumatic for our community, our country, the whole world, really. And while there are scientific causes for the disease and methods we can use to minimize its effect, simply managing it may not be enough. The people of Israel told Noah's story the way they did because they wanted it to change them; they wanted to become something new. And we have the same opportunity before us.

The people on the ark must have wondered what would happen next. Once the waters receded and they could step out on dry land, they must have asked, “Where to from here?” That's a question we need to ask ourselves now that we're looking at the possibility of things

getting back to normal. But before we can do that we need to know where “here” is. Do we find ourselves in the middle of disappointment and loss, anger and regret, as if we’re still on the water or can we make our way through the trauma to dry land where we can be grateful and open to new possibilities? If our “here” is still on the water then we may be headed to cynicism and despair. But if we can stand on dry land, even if it’s small and there’s still a lot of water around us, we might be able to find reason to hope. And hope is what God’s covenant with Noah is all about.

What we discover in these words is God is just as traumatized by what happened as the survivors on the ark. “Never again,” God says over and over in these few verses; “never again!” Do you notice God asks nothing of Noah and his family in return for God’s promise? Unique among all the covenants made in the Hebrew scriptures, nothing is expected from the people. This is a one-sided promise of God’s fidelity “with all living things.” By putting their trust in that promise, the people of Israel living in exile were able to look forward to a day when they would return. If we become mired in disappointment and anger over our circumstances, we’ll never be able to trust God’s promise, we’ll always be suspicious and cynical.

God is inviting us to become more than that. God is inviting us into a new relationship of trust that can lead us into hope and make us new. The signs of that hope are celebrated today in baptism and communion. By starting our Lenten observance with the sacraments we are saying we’re not alone no matter how challenging our lives become. We’re committing ourselves to the safety of God’s promise even though we live in a dangerous world. We’re opening ourselves up to God’s presence even when that presence is hard to discern. The relationship God establishes with the survivors in the ark is an invitation to all survivors to no longer allow their trauma to control them and to move forward into the new world God is creating.

That new world can be ours. We can be the agents of change who bring compassion to the deep waters of hurt and pain all around us. We can be an ark of hope for those struggling against waves of despair. God’s promise is meant for us and for all those who live with uncertainty and fear. Where we go from here depends on our willingness to respond to God’s invitation, to live in God’s presence, and put our trust in God’s promise of a new creation.

Amen