

“For the Healing of the Nations”  
January 1, 2023  
Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17; Revelation 22:1-5

We don't often gather on New Year's Day in our tradition. It's mostly considered a secular holiday and not a sacred one. But this year we have a chance to stop what we're doing and take a little time to reflect on the past year and put the start of the new year in a little different context. This is a chance to think more broadly about who we are as a species on a planet we share with so many other living creatures and what our role could be in promoting life and wholeness. The whole world, every human community that we know of, marks this day as a beginning, a fresh start. So, it makes sense that our focus shifts a little from our parochial claims to a more universal vision, to think about what matters not just to us as a faith community, but to the whole planet.

That's why I chose the passages we just heard from Genesis and Revelation. In Genesis we find the resolution to the story of Noah. Noah's story fits within the ranks of ancient middle eastern mythology. It's a story with roots in other cultures around Israel that's been appropriated and molded to provide a backdrop for a better understanding for Israel's relationship to their God. In this story God begins by regretting creation because it's all spiraled out of control. There's so much evil among humans that God decides to wipe it all away.

Yet, we know from the start that God isn't prepared for that. God makes arrangements to preserve a remnant of creation and commissions Noah to build an ark that can carry him and his family and a portion of every other species so when the waters recede there can be a new beginning. Everything goes according to plan. Noah and his family and all the other species live on the ark through a flood that covers the earth. You would think at the end of it God would be delighted to see that it worked. But these words from God don't really sound satisfied. If we had caused such a disruption in other people's lives as punishment on them for misbehaving, we might resolve it all with words like, “And let that be a lesson to you!” If it were any of us we would be thrilled to put our subordinates in their place.

But God doesn't sound happy about any of this. “Never again,” God says, “will I do this to creation.” What we learn about God in this story isn't that God is vindictive and rigid and quick to punish wrongdoing. What we learn is God is hurt by this destruction and vows never to go through that again. The promise God makes to Noah and all living creatures is to preserve them and never again bring destruction. What's required of Noah in return? Nothing. This is not a transaction, it's not a legal contract, there's nothing expected from Noah and his descendants. There's only God standing remorseful, full of regret and sadness, offering healing meant for everyone and everything, healing that has no end.

I've been reading a book recently about how our scriptures were formed from experiences of trauma. The stories we find in the Bible represent the work of generations of

people coming to terms with their circumstances of loss and disappointment. They're a way to find hope in the midst of despair. When the world you know is falling apart, where do you turn to start putting it back together, to find a sense of meaning again? That's what this story, formed during Israel's exile in Babylon, does for a people who's been forced from their home and had the center of their society destroyed by a powerful enemy. They look at their relationship to God in a new way; they imagine a future beyond their hardship and disappointment, a future they can cling to so they can survive. In her commentary on Genesis, Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Conner points out that the covenant God makes with Noah and all living creatures is only a first step toward healing. She writes, "Commentators speak of God's covenant with Noah and all living creatures as a comfort to survivors of the flood, but that may not be right. Survivors of disaster are rarely ready to receive comfort after enduring traumatic violence of any kind. Rather, this covenant may represent a first step toward reestablishing a sense of safety, a basic prerequisite for any future at all."

As we look back on the last year we can point to so many moments of tragedy and devastation. On the world stage, of course, there's been the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and all the damage that's done not just to the people there but to populations around the world that rely on production from Ukraine that's been stopped. One consequence has been the loss of food supply to relieve starvation on the horn of Africa that's been devastated by drought and crop failure caused by the effects of global warming. We live in an economically interdependent world, destruction in one place causes trauma everywhere. And when we look at our own community we find survivors of the Tops massacre still struggling to reestablish that sense of safety. Many are unable to go back to that grocery store that represents so much pain and loss. And then there's the trauma of just this past week, when in spite of so many acts of generosity and kindness, families were devastated by the loss of loved ones in the blizzard or the inability to get medical help for loved ones in their homes.

I'm not pretending the Bible has the answer to all that pain because it doesn't. What our scripture offers is testimony to a God who refuses to be indifferent to our suffering. The writer of Revelation is given a vision of a river of life that feeds the tree of life whose leaves are meant for the healing of the nations. God's desire for creation isn't that one part of it dominates the rest or that one particular expression of faith is elevated above every other. God's desire is the healing of the whole creation, all the nations. But that healing requires our participation, our cooperation. I go back over and over to the words of the great Desmond Tutu who once said, "Without God we cannot; without us, God will not." So, while our scripture is clear that God initiates covenant and is the author of salvation, without the people's response it's all empty.

As we enter a new year we carry with us the pain and trauma that's left its mark on us. But we also carry the possibility of healing. We move forward with visions of hope and the assurance that we aren't left to our own devices alone but are supported by the presence of a God who longs for our well-being and offers us a path to wholeness if we're willing to put aside our fear and distrust to take it. The way to wholeness, to healing of the nations, lies through compassion and justice. It lies in our willingness to be vessels of peace brave enough to stand up

against forces of hatred and speak out against attempts to marginalize people different from others because of gender identity or ethnic heritage, skin color or religion. We can be God's rainbow in the heavens, the sign of God's commitment to shalom, to healing and wholeness. The river of life can flow through us so the leaves we produce can be for the healing of the nations.

In every era, every generation, God calls people of faith to take up the mantle of justice and compassion so the whole creation can thrive. As we enter this new year, let our response to God's call be a resounding, "Yes!" Let us stand with our sisters and brothers in their pain and distress to make it our own so together we can be God's own instruments of peace.

Amen