

“Repairing What’s Broken”
February 18, 2024
Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

I suppose most of us grew up hearing the story of Noah or have told it to our kids over the years. Images from it are often used in nurseries, kids are given models of the ark with little pairs of animals to put in it. And probably because it involves animals and a rainbow at the end, it’s mostly considered a children’s story, a fairy tale. One way to change that impression is to treat it as if it were historically factual. You may have heard of something called the “Ark Encounter,” a life-size ark “museum” in Kentucky. That was built by a group who believes the earth is only 6,000 years old and that the story in Genesis is historically factual. In my mind that just replaces one fairy tale with another one. There’s no geological evidence of a worldwide flood and the planet is nearly 4 billion years old, with plenty of data to prove it. Dinosaurs and humans never coexisted, as they claim at the Ark Encounter. My advice: don’t waste your money.

But acknowledging that a flood depicted in this story never actually happened shouldn’t prevent us from taking the story itself seriously. I think we should approach it the way the famous Native American storyteller, Black Elk does when telling his stories. He says, “I don’t know if this story ever happened the way it’s told, but I know that it’s true.” It’s possible for a story to be true without being historically factual. The story of Noah tells us something true about the nature of God and our relationship to God, even though what’s depicted never actually occurred. Which is to say this is not a story only for children. It was written by adults who were struggling with a world-ending event after being torn from their home in Israel and forced into exile in Babylon. The questions they faced were, “Can we continue to trust this God who seems to have abandoned us to our enemies? Will our broken world ever be repaired?” Those are serious questions, existential questions. And the answers they find will determine their future.

We join the story today at the very end, after the flood and the devastation and the waiting on the ark for the waters to recede. The crisis is over. But what happens now? Before anything can happen, God has a word to speak to Noah and the other survivors. God is humbled by the damage and destruction that’s been done. At the beginning of the story, God looks at creation, especially humans, and regrets it all. There’s so much evil and violence; it’s all careened out of control. So God decides to wipe it all out. Like a potter when the vessel starts to go wobbly on the wheel or a painter whose picture just isn’t coming out right, God decides to start all over from scratch. Maybe not exactly from scratch: Two of every animal will be preserved and one righteous man, one person who seems to be immune to the evil and his family will be saved.

But God learns it’s not that simple. The words used in this passage convey a deep regret and remorse on God’s part. “Never again,” God tells Noah; three times it’s repeated, “never again.” God will not go through that pain again. God will repair what’s been broken and will use Noah and his family to do it. For the exiles in Babylon, as they looked on the shattered remains of their broken society, these words reveal a God who is able to change, a God whose heart can be broken. And for them, such a God can be trusted because this God knows their pain. In her

commentary on Genesis, scholar Kathleen M. O’Conner 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 disasters 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.” By clinging to this covenant the exiles in Babylon begin the long process of repairing the brokenness they carry, just as through that covenant God begins repairing the brokenness of creation after the flood.

Repairing what’s broken lies at the heart of the relationship between God and Israel. Over and over the people’s lives will be disrupted, their country overrun and controlled by more powerful neighbors, their citizens neglected and allowed to go hungry or homeless by the actions of their leaders and wealthy elite. In Isaiah, for instance, we find the prophet instructing the people to stop relying on empty piety to show their devotion asking, “Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? ...Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?” God looks to Israel to live with compassion and justice, to extend love and generosity to those in need, to repair their broken society and create a place where all can live in plenty and peace.

And as we look at the Noah story we can see that brokenness and repair aren’t limited just to humans. God’s covenant is with “all living creatures.” The entire earth is broken. In the biblical world there’s no such thing as an isolated experience. Everything is connected. So, what happens to cause damage to the social life of the people extends out into the whole created order. Many of the psalms reflect this connection; when things are well between God and the people, the earth rejoices. But when things are broken, when relationships are severed, the earth suffers. In Noah’s story it wasn’t enough for God to wipe out just the human population; the whole creation had to be washed away. We’re connected to the earth, even though we deny it.

Brokenness makes its way from the self to the family to society to the whole planet, like ripples from a stone tossed in a pond. And repair works the same way. It begins with ourselves. What in each of us is broken and in need of repair? I find it interesting that the writer of Mark’s gospel doesn’t tell us anything about the nature of the temptations Jesus endures. In Matthew and Luke we’re given some idea of that but here it’s left to our imagination. Part of the genius of this gospel is to allow us to insert ourselves in the narrative. Instead of being told what tempts Jesus, we’re invited to imagine what that might be based on our own experiences. What in you would lure you away from pursuing God’s kingdom? What needs to be repaired in you so you can respond to Jesus’ call?

By discovering that, by repairing what’s broken in us, we can begin to look outward and help to repair what’s broken in our relationships to those around us, whether it’s racism or poverty or violence. And if we can begin repairing those relationships, then we can give up our need to hoard land or food or water or minerals from the earth. We can repair the planet and bring the healing God offers Noah and the survivors of the flood. We can create a safe place for one another and for our sibling species where we can all thrive together.

I think that's the hope that lies at the heart of this season of Lent. As we enter this time of reflection and prayer we're invited to look deeply within ourselves and identify the brokenness we carry within that obscures the image of God in us and blinds us to God's image in others. That allows us to begin repairing what's broken. In his call to repent and believe the good news, Jesus points the way to God's kingdom at hand. He invites us to turn and be healed of our fear and hatred, to give up our need for violence and destruction. God's kingdom has arrived if we're willing to let it live through us and join Christ in repairing what's broken in the world.

Amen