

June 1, 2008 Third Sunday After Pentecost

Reflection: The Education of God

The story so far: God creates the universe and everything in it. But God is lonely, and wants a companion to share in the glory of the created world. So God creates Adam and Eve, and tells them they can have anything they want in the beautiful garden God created, except for the fruit of one tree. So they promptly eat the fruit, and are cast out of the garden. They have two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain thinks God likes Abel better than him, so he kills Abel, and is banished from his family? Cain eventually marries, and has some descendants, some of whom are pretty good sorts: they invent music, smith craft, and animal husbandry. But Cain's son Lamech wants to outdo his dad, and he boasts of killing a man just for striking him.

Adam and Eve have another son Seth, whose descendants worship God. One of his descendants is Enoch, who walked with God and did not die, but was taken to be with God. Enoch's son was Methusaleh, the oldest man in the Bible at nine hundred and sixty nine years old. Methusaleh's son Lamech had a son named Noah. While all this was going on, some angel-like creatures were living on the earth, and they had children with human women, and produced great heroes and warriors. This is the stuff of myth and legend.

By the time we get to Noah's place in the story, human wickedness had increased, and human thoughts tended more toward evil than toward God. Immorality and violence plagued humanity, and God's heart was broken at what his beloved companions had become. Like a betrayed wife or cuckolded husband, God just wanted it all to end – to start fresh, without any of the horrors that humankind had inflicted on each other and on the earth. God felt it was the only way to save the whole earth from the destruction humanity wrought – but it broke God's heart. An old Jewish teaching on this story says “Before He brought on the flood, God Himself kept seven days of mourning, for He was grieved at heart.”
Midrash, Tanhumma, Shemini 11a

God chose destruction and violence to address human destruction and violence. God chose to save one human family, and enough of the animals to start afresh. Depending on how you read the story, the waters on the earth rose up, or the firmament separating the skies from the water above the skies disintegrated, and there was a deluge. Again, depending on which version of the story you pay attention to, the waters remained for 40 days or 150 days. The result was massive death and destruction: all because humanity forgot God, and chose evil.

It's not a pretty story, is it? Noah's Ark has become a favourite story for children and an adorable decorating theme for babies' nurseries, but it's actually a frightening story of how God perpetrates the ultimate genocide.

Do I think it actually happened? No, I don't. There is geological evidence that there was massive flooding in the area between the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea in ancient times, and the chances are good that the Biblical Flood story, as well as similar stories in other near Eastern cultures, are a distant memory of such a catastrophic event. Each culture puts a different spin on their stories. In most versions of the story, there is a hero who conquers the chaos caused by a god or goddess of some kind and preserves human life. In the Biblical version, God is the chief actor. It is a morality play, a story about the education of God.

Yes, God actually learns something in this story. We don't read about it in the passage we have been given, but after the flood, Noah makes a sacrifice to God, and at that time, God makes a covenant: to

never again destroy the earth and its creatures. The sign of the covenant is a bow in the heavens: it is a weapon, with the curve of the bow and its invisible arrow pointed at God. God is saying, in essence, “I’m making this promise, and I’m staking my very existence on it. That rainbow is to remind both of us of the promise I’ve made today.”

God learned that responding to human violence and corruption with more violence and destruction is not an answer. It doesn’t change the nature of humanity. Indeed, one of the first things Noah does after he gets out of the ark is to get roaring drunk. When his youngest son Ham accidentally stumbles across his father passed out naked in his tent, Noah curses Ham’s son Canaan to be a slave to his relatives. Humanity clearly hasn’t changed any, then and now. God has.

God has discovered that the only way to deal with human depravity is with compassion. Violence simply begets more violence – but love can heal. Persistent, faithful, undeserved, sometimes even unrequited love: that’s what God has for humanity. That’s what we know, through the Good News that Jesus came to share with us. The story of Noah’s ark and the destruction and restoration of the world, is not only a story about the evolving of God’s great love for humanity; it’s also an evolution in the human perception of God.

I imagine that most of us who have faith in God have asked ourselves at times: “Why doesn’t God put an end to it all? An end to the violence, an end to exploitation, an end to greed and perversion and all kinds of human evil.” The story we have heard answers that question. God will persuade, rather than coerce. God will challenge, rather than enforce. God’s power will be exercised in vulnerability, rather than violence. Throughout the Biblical narrative, we find the people wavering in their understanding of God: sometimes depicting God as a warrior God, a God of absolute justice and little mercy; at other times depicting God as the betrayed lover, the grieving parent, the shepherd who wants to gather his sheep in where they are safe from harm. My faith is in the latter understanding of God – and I think history bears me out.

As I’ve said, the human story doesn’t get any better, in the Bible, or in modern history. Noah’s descendants become tribes and nations that war against each other; humans build the tower of Babel and are scattered to the ends of the earth; they worship a multitude of idols that are not God; brother kills brother, women’s lives are bartered for the safety or dignity of their men – and the Biblical story goes on. All we have to do is look at the newspaper headlines any day of the week to know that human nature hasn’t changed.

But God hasn’t given up on us yet. God continues to call, out of a persistent and passionate love for the companions God created at the very beginning of the story. That’s the story of the book of Genesis: the story of a fumbling, bumbling, flawed, destructive humanity, the God who calls to them, and the few who are willing to answer. Out of such stuff, the people of God are made.

One of my favourite preachers, Nathan Nettleton puts it this way:

“Somewhere in all the bitter regret and searing grief and destructive fury, God had a change of heart. Somewhere in all that, God found the capacity to love us unreservedly no matter how far we had fallen and how corrupt we had become. But God didn’t just become resigned to evil, and despair of ever bringing the world to completion and fulfilment. Rather, in that new commitment to personally absorb the pain and grief and to extend to us a deeply intimate love and mercy, God found a new way of setting us on the path to wholeness. As we see so dramatically in Christ as he offered himself for us on the cross, and as he goes on offering himself to us at this [communion] table, God enters into our

brokenness in order to draw us into God's wholeness.

God continues to long for the world and its inhabitants to live up to the image of God in which we were created. And God continues to feel deep grief and hurt at our resistance. But God has built an ark of gracious love and mercy to preserve us from destruction and carry us safely to the place where we can make a new start and fulfil our ancient destiny, and this time we are all in the same boat."

[From, "God's change of heart : A sermon on Genesis 6:5 - 9:17" by Nathan Nettleton, 29 May 2005 ,
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Amen.