

## “God Grows Up”

There is a saying that “familiarity breeds contempt.” A corollary might be that the better we think we know something the less interested we are in it. Today I’m hoping that’s not true. Because while Noah and the ark may be the best known of all the stories in the Bible, it’s not something most of us have thought about either often or deeply. The fact that we treat it as a simple children’s story masks its transformational complexity.

One dimension of that complexity lies in the fact that the text as we have it is knit together from multiple sources. Part of it belongs to what we have come to call the “J” tradition, because that writer usually uses the name JAHWEH to refer to God. This source is ancient and folksy; we can imagine the J account being told around a campfire. But the J document is interwoven with another version we call the P document, which comes to us from the Priestly tradition in Israel. It’s very concerned with structure and ritual. You may have noticed that our scripture reading for today jumps around a bit. The lectionary folks did that so that this lesson would be taken entirely from the P source and sensible preachers wouldn’t waste everybody’s time explaining all this stuff!

The priestly writings are more formal and structured than J. A good example is found in Genesis 1, where the creation story moves in a remarkably tidy fashion through each day. It includes the kind of repetition we might associate with worship: after each day’s work, God declares creation to be good; and at the end, a final benediction declares it “very good.”

In the Noah story this sense of order manifests itself in detailed instructions for building the ark. This is God as Norm Abram assuring us that a measured “drawing” is available after the show and reminding us to wear our safety glasses. God as Norm checks everything for square, and sees that it is “pretty good,” high praise in the parlance of New England reserve.

The P writer has a concern that things stay in proper relation to one another, each in its place and according to its kind. As the story of the flood unfolds in the P narrative, creation is undone element by element. The fountains of the great deep are opened up, destroying the separation of dry land from the waters. And the dome of the firmament, the sky, is breached and waters pour down from the heavens until everything is as it began, a watery chaos, the only remaining signs of creation being light and darkness and the tiny ark bobbing precariously on the waters of oblivion. Similarly in the P version the recovery from the flood repeats the orderly pattern of creation.

But the really interesting thing about these two different sources is that they don’t agree on many details; and whoever edited this thing lets the disagreements stand to grind against one another. In the J version, for example, the ark contains *seven* pairs of all clean animals and one pair of unclean animals; in the P version, everything goes on two by two, elephants and kanga-rooey Ruhes. (My favorite part.) In true biblical fashion, in the final analysis it is more important that both these voices be heard than that they agree.

So this story is complicated because it's old and because it is stitched together from multiple sources. But it also contains a boatload (pardon the expression) of interesting distractions—bright, shiny objects to cross our path and lure us off into irrelevance. There is for example the fact that there are similar flood stories in Babylonian and Mesopotamian cultures (anyone for Gilgamesh?). And anthropologists of religion have a field day chasing down other stories of creation being undone and redone. And Leonard Nimoy is endlessly in search of Mt. Ararat and Noah's ark and Captain Kirk. There are lots of places to get lost in this strange and complicated story.

But let's keep our eye on the ball. This story is in Genesis because it is a story about God. It is a story about God.

You know the story... sort of... don't you? Creation is good, but one day God looks around and notices that people are evil. We don't want to press for details, but our Puritan forebears would have been pretty sure this had to do with sex. God is angry because we've been bad, and decides to punish and annihilate the earth via the royal flush. Again, there are no specifics about what is so bad, but be good for goodness' sake. In the absence of information, just be anxious. Noah alone is righteous, so do whatever he does and don't do whatever he doesn't do, whatever that is, because we're starting all over. Of course we identify with Noah, the righteous individual, and not with the rest of humankind, who get washed away. (Don't you think you'd be on the boat? Of course you do!)

God will save all the animals because they're mostly so cute, especially the giraffe with its head sticking out through the roof. It's too bad for the unicorn and the dinosaurs and flying horses like Pegasus who don't make it on board; but everybody's snug as a bug in a rug. Our sense of the timing of this is indistinct. We've got the forty days and nights down: that's how long it rained, at least in the J version. In the P version the flood stage is 150 days and there's standing water for over a year. How's that ark looking to you now?

At the end of it all there's a rainbow, symbol of God's promise never to send another flood. There's a spiritual that goes, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign: no more water... the fire next time!" Noah sends out the dove three times. The first time she comes right back; the second time she brings back an olive branch; the third time she doesn't come back at all. So the animals parade off the ark and we all live happily ever after—or at least until Noah plants a vineyard and auditions for Patriarchs Gone Wild by getting drunk and naked.

But a more careful reading yields a very different understanding.<sup>1</sup> God is not angry, God is sad: "And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." Humankind is "corrupt," not just in the sense of doing bad things but in the perversion of the human heart: "... every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5) Even the imagination of human beings has ceased to yearn for God. Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O

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<sup>1</sup> Here we are particularly indebted to Walter Brueggemann and his commentary *Genesis in the series Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.

God; our souls are restless until they find their rest in you.” Well, in this reading the human soul is not restless, but perfectly content in its wickedness. Even our dreams are not dreams of God. And like a hard drive that has been irrevocably corrupted by a virus, there is nothing that can be done. Humankind has a terminal disease of the spirit. God’s dream for the goodness of creation is a failed dream. God is terribly sad.

The flood is a desperate step, the systematic undoing of creation and starting over in every detail. Noah is the hope, the remnant, the possibility of new beginning after the great disaster. The physical disaster of the flood is simply the acknowledgement of the spiritual disaster of the corrupted human heart. Whose fault is this? The story doesn’t go there, and neither should we... yet.

Love builds the ark, just as love builds community that offers protection from the storm. The Christian Church has long seen itself as a boat on a raging sea. The disciples are portrayed this way in the gospels. The architecture of this room [the sanctuary] follows the time-honored tradition of portraying the ribbing of a boat in the beams of the ceiling.

At the end there is the image of God’s bow at rest in the clouds. God will never again “draw down” on humankind. God will stick with us. Is this because creation has been purged and purified through the flood? Is there now a new race of moral supermen and women to populate the earth? No. Even at the end of the story, as the covenant promise is being made God says, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” God has no illusions. But God has made the promise of relationship, and will stick with us even though we will disappoint. The relationship will not just be about blame, and whose fault it is when things go wrong. God has grown up into the messiness of love.

Matt Mardis-LeCroy likes to say, “You can have tidiness or you can have relationship, but you can’t have both.” To love is to be disappointed, to hurt, to grieve, to forgive, to begin again. Order is separate wings of the house, separate vacations, separate lives. Love is messy. Here God gets down and dirty with humankind in the give and take of covenant.

As Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, it’s not that God is lowering expectations or giving up on the dream for creation. But God lives into the grief of pursuing that dream through ongoing, costly relationship. This is what it means to love.

God grows up into the messiness of love and calls us to grow up, too: to have no illusions about our own goodness; nor to seek refuge in our attempts to control God through our religious manipulations. We define and confine God with our theology; we try to control God with our rituals or restrict God to particular sacred times and places and occasions. But relationship is an ongoing daily interaction.

Significantly, we live out this interaction not in desperate isolation, but in and through community—another extended exercise in messiness, to be sure. Brueggemann describes the community of the church at its best as, “an island of candor in a flood of self-deception.”<sup>2</sup> Isn’t that a wonderful image: “an island of candor in a flood of self-

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<sup>2</sup> Op.cit., p. 82.

deception.” We come together to try to acknowledge the truth about who and what we are, to practice the honesty and forgiveness that are at the heart of every loving relationship. We acknowledge our shared journey in God—not the stern and condemning judge who must be appeased, nor the amorphous cloud of affirmation that has no real presence and substance in our lives; but a real and ongoing relationship to a God who grieves and grows up... a God who loves, and calls us to do the same.

Isn't it wildly and wonderfully ironic? A story we dismiss and consign to children calls describes the heart of God and calls us to a true maturity of faith. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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