

COVENANT, THE PROMISE  
Genesis 7: 11-14; 17-18; Genesis 8:1-12  
June 6, 2010

Thomas D. York  
Knox Presbyterian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio

If the guiding principle in your life is self-protection: if, more than anything else, you hope to minimize the possibilities of getting hurt, you ought not to love anyone or anything. C.S. Lewis advised that if you do not wish your heart to be broken, you must never give it away.

That is the subject of the second story in the Bible. Couched in charming, dramatic images it makes one of the most astonishing claims in human history - namely that God is a lover who risks a broken heart for his beloved and, furthermore, that God wants us to know that and remember it every time the fragile, pastel colors of a rainbow appear in the sky.

After Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel, and one section of begats, the Biblical story presents Noah, his ark and the great flood. It is part of the genesis - the beginnings of a religious tradition.

The whole story of Noah is rich and magnificent and it is clearly related to a lot of other religious stories about a great flood which circulated in the ancient near east. Many of the natural phenomenon used to strike terror in the hearts of ancient people. A violent thunderstorm suggested the possibility that the whole system was falling in. An earthquake was more than a suggestion that one's world was coming apart at the seams. Even the daily setting of the sun could be a process that might continue indefinitely. One common motif in many ancient religions is the idea that the gods use the more frightening natural phenomena as weapons to punish wicked people. There are several ancient religious myths which depict the deity as an archer, shooting arrows - lightning bolts - at people. It is a powerfully vivid picture and if you have ever been a near miss in a lightning storm you have a personal sense of the incredible power and the reality of fear the experience can generate.

So Yahweh, God of the Hebrews, is first portrayed in this story as a deity who is unhappy with the behavior of his people. It seems they do not wish to play by the rules, and as other eastern deities do with regularity, this God decides to punish, in fact to do away with all of them.

But this story inserts, at the beginning, a fundamental difference. As soon as God decides to punish he begins to hurt inside, and then to have second thoughts about the punishment. The Genesis text puts it beautifully ... "the Lord was sorry ... and it grieved him." Walter Bruggeman, a fine Old Testament scholar, comments: "With amazing boldness the text invites (us) to penetrate to the heart of God ... What we find is not an angry tyrant, but a troubled parent who grieves over the alienation." (*Interpretation: Genesis*, p. 77)

What parent, or teacher, or significant adult of any kind has not experienced that. Anger with a child one loves becomes deeply felt sorrow that a relationship is strained. Anger, under the benevolent pressure of love, becomes grief and it is terribly and literally true that to express that anger is to hurt in a profound way.

That is what the Noah story proposes about God. God grieves over the alienation in the creation. Unlike other deities, God is not enraged, but heart-broken.

And so even as judgment begins to be carried out, this God's mind begins to change. He remembers Noah and gives Noah specific instructions and when the ark is completed and its inhabitants are in place, the ancient story - in one of loveliest ideas in all of literature says: "and the Lord shut them in." God is looking very much like a loving parent, not a scowling judge.

God remembered Noah, and when the floods subsided, and the dry ground appeared a messenger dove returned with an olive leaf to signify the rebirth of life. Noah got off the ark and built an altar, and God blessed Noah and established a Covenant with Noah which was actually God's promise not to destroy life, and then sealed the promise by placing that mythological bow, with which ancient deities attacked people, in the sky, slack; arched over the creation God loves enough to save and nurture and replant.

It is the first Covenant in the Bible; the beginning of an entire new religious consciousness, a new perception into the heart of God. It is not essentially a story about rain, floods, endangered species, genetics, or life in the confines of the ark. It is an amazing story about a God whose fundamental characteristics vis-a vis the world - is not anger, but grace.

The Covenant promise to Noah is that God will not destroy the world or human life. At the time the story was written - and most authorities agree it was probably in the sixth century B.C. - that was an important assertion. It represented the developing Hebrew perception that nature was God's gift and that if one understood enough about nature to live in harmony with it, nature could be counted on to cooperate with the nurturance of life. It is a theological position which is the foundation for all physical science, particularly medicine.

It also suggests that the alienation between God and his people is still a threat to the whole system. God has promised not to destroy but to enhance life. That promise has been kept, new every morning. The best natural theologian I know is a botanist, Lewis Thomas, who keeps reminding us of the amazing reality of the world in which life is possible. Reflecting on those wonderful pictures the space explores keep sending back to us, Thomas wrote:

"Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive. The photographs of the dry, pounded surface of the moon on the foreground, dead as an old bone. Aloft, floating free, beneath the moist membrane of bright, blue sky, is the rising earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos .. " (*The Lives of a Cell*, p. 170)

The promise has been magnificently kept. But on our side of it, we keep fouling the air with industrial pollutants, and poisoning the ground, and then refusing to spend the money to clean up the chemical waste we have created. God hasn't destroyed life - but we are prepared to - all of it, everywhere - a thousand times over.

The chaos represented by the Genesis flood is a powerful symbol of the threat to order, society, life itself that every generation feels. It was a powerful metaphor for the Jews in Babylonian exile, and again in our age in the Holocaust. The word here is the Covenant promise - that it need not be: that the God who loved us - will not abandon us: that the world will continue to sustain us: that the power of God will always be on the side of reconciliation and justice and peace: that

within the Covenant promise of God there is hope as green and good as that beautiful leaf of olive the dove carried in its beak.

The Covenant with Noah proclaims at the beginning of the Bible story that God has turned to God's whole creation and God's people particularly in a new way. God has changed God's mind, and not only has not abandoned the creation to God's anger but now joins it. God's anger has become God's parental sadness. When people disobey and do evil things, God is hurt - as a parent is hurt under those circumstances. It is a theological assertion that proceeds on a straight line to the cross. It was and is the most radical and revolutionary religious idea in all of history

I had the privilege of hearing the former president of Princeton Seminary, Dr. Thomas Gillespie, deliver several lectures on Biblical Interpretation. He is a scholar and skilled preacher. During the last lecture he afforded us the rare privilege of knowing his own commitment. He said:

"The most critical decision for any of us is this: do we truly believe God is actually present and active in the world? Or does God simply touch the world peripherally? I would not dare preach if I did not believe God was radically and dynamically present in the world. The peripheral notion is practical atheism."

The fundamental religious question is prompted by the Noah story, in the assertion that God not only is, but is a participant, an active and loving party in the human story.

I found it again in a crisp essay, "Embarrassed by God's Presence," in the *Christian Century* by William Willimon. "Ultimately," he wrote, "it comes down to the issue of God's presence. The central problem for the church is that it is essentially atheistic ... it builds its structures on the presupposition that God doesn't really matter." (*Christian Century*, 1/30/05, p. 100, William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas)

The Judeo assertion in Noah's story, which becomes a Christian experience in Jesus Christ, is that God is gloriously present in the creation; that God, the lover-creator, is dynamically at work to nurture and heal and reconcile human life. That is the promise.

And it is the promise that God will remember. God did not forget Noah. God does not forget his people - anyone of them - ever. That assertion approaches the deepest human question and the most profound human need. Is there any ultimate meaning to my being alive these few decades? Is there anything lasting about this creature that I am and these days and weeks and years that I am living? Or is life a "walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour on the stage and then is heard no more," as Macbeth suggested?

We know the meaning of that. Our best literature reveals the dark night of every honest human soul when one's own mortality and the sense of being soon forgotten is very real. Our best thinkers do not shrink from it. Thus, the late Paul Tillich:

"Is there anything that can keep us from being forgotten?" he asked. And then, with the elegant simplicity of God's truth, he answered, "That we were known from eternity and will be remembered in eternity is the only certainty that can keep us from being forgotten forever." (*The Eternal Now*, p. 25 in Bruggeman, op. cit, p. 85)

We celebrate the power and grace of the Covenant promise in the sacraments. God's promise to remember forever came to Noah, and we affirm it every time we baptize an infant. We are celebrating God's personal love for each of us: "This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter," never to be forgotten.

We affirm that most amazing grace: and through it all - are loved by God. We, and our dear ones, are remembered forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.