

THE GOD OF ANIMALS, III: ADRIFT ON A SHORELESS SEA
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—GENESIS 6-9, SELECTED VERSES
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Woody Shook has one of the aptest names I know anything about. He's a Presbyterian preacher in Vermont who makes his living now in the art of wood-carving. We commissioned him to carve this cross for the dedication of the new building. I hope you can see it from the balcony. Noah's Ark is at the top. Woody carved the hull of the ark out of Mediterranean cypress, because the Bible tells us that Noah carved his ark out of gopher wood, and we don't know what gopher wood is exactly, but Mediterranean cypress is a good guess. The roof of the ark is carved from Bald Cypress, the state tree of Louisiana, because Woody thought it would be good if we remembered the victims of our own worst deluge.

We put this cross in the Kindergarten Sunday School Classroom, so that some of our littlest Christians would see it every time they came to church, because after the story of the birth of the baby Jesus himself, Noah's Ark might be the most beloved Bible story of all for children.

But you have to wonder why. It's one of the cruelest stories in the Bible. Genesis tells us that very early in its history the world went so awry God couldn't remember why on earth he'd bothered creating a world in the first place. "I am sorry that I made them," God grumbles, "so I will blot them all off the face of the earth, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds too." How did this become a children's story?

I picked this story weeks ago, and it might be the most ill-timed scripture lesson I've ever chosen. When Cyclone Nargis tore Than

Lwin's house apart, he and his family clambered aboard a small boat, which promptly capsized in the storm surge. For six hours Than Lwin, latter-day Noah, clung to anything that would float while he was swept out of his village in the Irawaddy Delta into the open ocean miles away. On his terrifying float out to sea, he could touch the treetops. He doesn't know what became of his family; he presumes they were lost. In his village of 7000, 600 survived. Across Myanmar, 78,000 are dead and 55,000 are missing; the Red Cross presumes most of the missing are dead, for a total of over 128,000.¹

We were just getting over the South Asian tsunami on Boxing Day, 2004, which left over 200,000 dead, and Hurricane Katrina less than a year later, 1400 dead, and—almost—an entire American city, so I'm not sure I really want to preach a story about God's implacable wrath so close on the heels of this huge catastrophe. Wikipedia says that in 3000 BC, world population was 25 million, which means that the casualty count of Noah's Flood was 24,999,992; eight were saved.

There's no geological or archaeological evidence for a global deluge near the end of the prehistoric era, at the dawn of literate humanity, but the mythologies of many cultures feature a flood story, 175 different stories by one count, so some see this unified chorus of voices as evidence for the historicity of a universal flood. If so many far-flung

¹"Amid Myanmar Secrecy, Tales of Survival," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2008. The author's name is withheld to protect the reporter's identity from the Myanmar government.

cultures sharing no communication, no common language, and no commerce tell the same story, perhaps there really *was* one.

In one recent theory, two respected geologists speculate that melting polar icecaps around 5500 BC raised the waters of the Mediterranean Sea so high that it breached its land bridge along the Bosphorus Straits and inundated the Black Sea, which had until then been a freshwater lake. Before our geology got a little more sophisticated, many people reasonably concluded that if you can find lobster and halibut fossils near the summit of Mount Everest, there must once have been the Mother of All Floods.

It might be simpler to remember that early civilizations flourished along rivers in fertile flood planes, along the Nile and in the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, so winter melt-off floods would have been frequent, even annual, experiences, every springtime. In the dim memory of every culture in every land, there must be a real, core, historical experience of a man who saved himself, his family, his golden retriever, and his livestock by piling them into a boat.

Perhaps there was once even an eccentric but shrewd farmer who presciently anticipated the spring rains and began knocking together a seaworthy craft before there was even a cloud in the sky. They made fun of him, but he lived. So maybe Noah is Everyman and the flood story is “the archetype of human catastrophe.”²

It’s not so much the *mythology* of Genesis I have trouble with; it’s the *theology*. I hate to say it, but I’m afraid we’ll have to jettison

²Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), pp. 398-399.

(pun intended), we’ll have to jettison one of the central theological presuppositions of the Genesis Flood Story. Can I throw an unwieldy sesquipedalian phrase at you? The Genesis Flood Story is an example of Retributive Theodicy. I will explain.

Theodicy, of course, is the attempt to explain why bad things happen in God’s good and presumably perfect world. Theodicy is the attempt to justify the ways of God to humanity, as Milton put it. Harold Kushner’s book is a theodicy: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Theodicy is the attempt to answer the blunt question “Why does God try to kill us every springtime?” A Retributive Theodicy answers the blunt question “Why does God try to kill us every springtime?” by theorizing, “Well, we must deserve it.” A natural calamity is God’s just retribution upon sinful humanity. If you’re good, you live. If you’re bad, you die. It’s as simple as that. “The Lord God saw that human wickedness was great upon the earth,” Genesis tells us, “and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. It made God slap God’s forehead and go, “What on earth possessed me to shape these scoundrels from the dust of the earth in the first place? I changed my mind. I’m going to start over. And so with the most awesome bath or baptism in the history of the world, that’s just what God does: God starts over.

It doesn’t take a Karl Barth or a Paul Tillich to figure out what’s wrong with this theology. Comprehensive, indiscriminate holocausts never balance the scales of justice. We should never let God get away with what we’d hold Pol Pot or Joseph Stalin responsible for. As we discovered again in China this week, natural calamities always grind up innocent folk in the gears of retribution—children, for instance—in disproportionate numbers. “Our grief is incomparable,” said Li Ping in Sichu-

an the other day as he pulled a pair of pink pajamas over the bruised and lifeless limbs of his eight-year-old daughter Ke. “We married late and had a child late. She is our only child.” There are so many child victims the undertakers want to cremate them *en masse*.³

I’m hoping Voltaire killed Retributive Theodicy for good when he wrote *Candide* after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Voltaire was horrified that any self-respecting Christian would believe that God would destroy pious Lisbon while watching profane Paris party away.⁴ Before Voltaire there was Jesus, who repudiated Retributive Theodicy when he pointed out to his disciples that the rain falls on the just and on the unjust. Raindrops don’t discriminate, but God must, and does.

Well, so much for what’s wrong with this text and what’s NOT the point. What’s right with this text and what IS the point? Well, as you probably guessed, I do have a couple. I do think this is Gospel for us this morning on the heels of Cyclone Nargis, Hurricane Katrina, and the Boxing Day Tsunami.

One truth the Flood Story gets right is that the fate of creation hinges on human behavior. Genesis tells us that flood waters inundated the earth and almost destroyed all terrestrial life because men and women were not behaving like creation’s kings and queens. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was very great upon the earth, and that every

³Quoted by Jim Yardley, “Tiny Bodies in a Morgue, and Grief in China,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2008.

⁴Pointed out by J. David Pleins in the article “Flood” from *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, gen. ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), vol. 2, p. 468.

inclination of the human heart was only evil continually.” Polar bears drown because their ice floes recede further and further apart, and the ice floes recede further and further apart because human activity is warming the global atmosphere at an unsustainable rate. Human beings will grow up and become better stewards of our world, or there will be a flood; Genesis got that right. First it will be the polar bears, then Santa Barbara, Myrtle Beach, and Charleston.

The second thing Genesis gets right is that we are indeed all together in an ark, the human family and its animal friends, and together we’re all adrift on a shoreless sea. The ark is a blue sphere, and the shoreless sea is a black immensity 28 billion light years across. There is nowhere to land and nowhere else to live so we’re all in this together until the lurching craft comes to rest on God’s front porch.

Two of every kind on Noah’s Ark. I wonder if he lost any during his year-long excursion. Legend has it, of course, that the unicorns were so busy cavorting around that they missed the ark’s departure, but I wonder if Noah lost any en route. I wonder how many we will lose before our spherical ark comes to rest on God’s front porch.

The rainbow, of course, is a string around God’s little finger. It’s God’s reminder, when God gets mad as hell, not to destroy the world. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “It’s a perfect curve of color, stretching clear across the sky: God’s everlasting Yes to all who live in its embrace.”⁵

But it’s a reminder to us as well. It’s us and the animals. We all get there together, or we

⁵Barbara Brown Taylor, “Refreshing God’s Memory,” in *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 34.

don't get there at all. Will you remember that the next time you see that perfect curve of color stretching clear across the sky?

The third thing Genesis gets right is that this is God's world, and life will go on; by the skin of its teeth, life will go on. Thornton Wilder got it right too in his odd little play: by the skin of their teeth, Mr. and Mrs. Androbus will survive. There will be more cyclones in Myanmar and tsunamis in the Indian Ocean and hurricanes in the Gulf and many close calls but life will go on. It went on 60 million years ago when a meteor blackened the sky and annihilated the dominant lizards, but cockroaches and sharks and tiny rat-like furballs waited out the darkness and that is why an almost furless mammal now dominates the earth. It went on after the Black Death wiped out a quarter of the world's population in the fourteenth century. It went on after Hitler and Hirohito killed 40 million people in the 1940's.

I don't believe God aims killing floods at sinful humanity, but I do believe in divine providence, and I do believe that in some global, comprehensive, macroscopic way, he's got the whole world in his hands, and creation is headed unerringly towards God's good purpose. As long as the earth endures, seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall never cease.

So, Mr. and Mrs. Androbus, Mr. and Mrs. Noah, Everyman, Everywoman, when in your life it seems as if it's been raining for forty days and forty nights—forty days and nights of depression, forty days and nights of loneliness, forty days and nights of chemotherapy, forty days and nights and more of a broken heart after the loss of your life's love—will you remember that he's got the whole world in his hand, he's got you and me, brother, in his hand, he's got you and me, sister, in his hand,

he's got the whole world in his hand. One day the dove will return with an olive branch in her beak. One day the leaky vessel will come to rest on God's front porch.

You know, maybe it is a children' story after all. One pastor tells the story of a little girl who likes to play with Noah's ark. She lives with her mother in a shelter where they've fled an abusive father. Every day when the bus drops her off at the shelter after school, she grabs a cup of juice and the two allotted cookies and settles on the floor to line up the plastic animals two by two to enter the wooden ark. With grave politeness, the preacher asks, "Where are the animals going?" She gives the preacher a strange look, as if no question could be more absurd. She says, "They're going **home!**" But where is home? What does this child know of home? She's never really been home. The preacher asks, "You say the animals are going home. But where is home?" He's caught her in mid-procession. The camels have just gone up the ramp into the shell of the ark, and now the pair of rhinoceroses behind them must be carefully helped into their berth. Without lifting her eyes from her flock she answers, "God." The preacher says, "Oh, you mean God will give them a home?" "No," she says, "God will be their home." The rhinos teeter for an instant at the top of the ramp, and clatter into the hold. The ship is setting sail. It pulls away from the dock. The destination is God. They are going home.⁶

Have you ever seen a rainbow? What is it for? What does it mean? Doesn't it mean home? For all of us?

⁶Adapted and abbreviated from Patrick Willson, "Sailing Home," *The Christian Century*, February 2-9, 1994, p. 99.