

Burying the Hatchet

Genesis 9:8-17

Rev. Dan Schumacher

What would you do if you were God? And you saw the world you had made gone crazy?

When we read this story we have historically read it in one of two ways. The first is that of a children's story of animals and rainbows. In fact, if we were to get up right now and take a field trip back to our nursery, a mural of what biblical story is painted on the wall?

And we're not alone. The last church I served had a similar mural painted on the wall of its nursery. And the church I served before that did too! In fact, if you were to come into my office for a visit and you had a small child with you, guess what is the one toy I have for you child to play with: a small wooden ark filled with brightly painted animals.

This interpretation of the story, then, is often about God's love for animals, about remembering God's love each time we see a rainbow, even about the bright side of the storm.

The second interpretation of this story is definitely not for children. In this one, God is so angry with human rebellion that God floods the whole earth, wiping out nearly everything in a fit of divine rage.

This version is a horror story. Floods tear down dams and rip through valleys, washing away villages. Hurricanes batter coasts and pull houses down and people out to sea. Tidal waves a hundred feet tall batter apartment buildings and tear through city streets. The rains fall so hard and fast that the Grand Canyon is filled to the brim. The world is coming apart at the seams, water sweeping away every living thing – and our God takes credit for it.

In this reading of the story, God practices genocide – the brutal eradication of all people – in order to wash the world clean of the human stain. I'm not one to use the word "smite" lightly, but this interpretation is a story about a God who is ready and willing to smite you. Just give God one more reason, and see what happens...

Of course, neither of these versions of the story is the *whole* story and neither contains much truth.

The truth is, this story isn't about rain or floods or water at all. This is a story about the inclinations of people... and about the inclinations of God... and, most importantly, its about which of those two is more likely to change.

Rev. Ryan Ahlgrim tells this story:

“In Indiana along the Wabash River, there’s an old town that has been preserved for the tourists... called New Harmony. New Harmony was founded in 1825 by a fellow by the name of Robert Owens. And what Robert Owens was wanting to do was to create the perfect society. He wanted this town to be a place of happiness, innovation, prosperity; and this was going to happen through the use of education, science, cutting-edge technology, and communal living.

So he put out a request for people from all over to come and join him in this utopian experiment. And all kinds of people came. Scientists came. Engineers came. Innovators of all stripes came. They came together and they did some remarkable things together in this town called New Harmony. For instance, they created a system for free public education for men *and* women – way ahead of its time for 1825. And, they were the first town in the United States to have a free public library.

And yet despite these innovations and despite the really wonderful things they were trying to do, within 2 years New Harmony started falling apart. And within four years, it had disbanded entirely.

What went wrong?

People.

Grouchy people. Lazy people. Selfish people. Arrogant people.

The reason New Harmony failed was because it was made up of people” (Lent B:1, *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, Feb. 21, 2021).

New Harmony wasn’t the first to try to build a utopia, and it won’t be the last – but none will succeed as long as they involve people... human beings... folks like you and me. It turns out, and this may come as a shock to some of you, but you aren’t perfect. And neither am I. In fact, we’re far from it. And we are kidding ourselves if we think God hasn’t noticed.

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen. 6:5-6).

What would you do if you were God? And you saw the world you had made gone crazy?

Walter Brueggeman says that “God decided to drown his sorrows” (“Flooded with Fidelity,” *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*, Vol. 2, 67).

You see, it's *not* a story about water. It's a story about God's deep emotional attachment to his creation — and to us people, no matter how grouchy, lazy, selfish, or arrogant we can be.

But God did remember one person — a man named Noah. A man who God thought was righteous and blameless. So God told him to build an ark and to take he and his entire household onto that boat, and to fill that boat with enough animals to repopulate the earth.

So Noah got to work building a giant boat on dry ground, chasing down squirrels and herding cats onto that big boat; working night and day to finish the boat and gather the animals.

And you have to wonder, as Noah was building this ark, if he thought to himself, “Am I really as good as God thinks I am? Am I capable of starting an ideal humanity?”

Well, Noah finished the ark — and the rains came and the water came from everywhere: water from above, water from below, water from the sides. And everything gets swept away — every home, every building, every skyscraper, every animal, every person. God just cleanses it all, cleanses that human stain.

And it didn't stop until there's just that one boat bobbing on the waves. And after forty days of rain it finally ceased, and that boat continued bobbing along until the waters receded enough for it to come to rest on the solid earth.

Noah got out and, while his sea legs were still wobbly, he built an altar to the LORD and offered up burnt offerings in thanks to God. God could smell the offerings, and it pleased him. And God could see Noah's gratitude.

But God could see something else, too.

God could see that Noah was *not* perfect... and neither was Noah's family. When God looked real close, God saw that Noah and his family had all the same flaws as all the other human beings. The inclination of the human heart was still evil continuously (Gen. 8:20-22).

Sin was in Noah — and it is in us, too. That's why the great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr wondered how anyone could doubt the doctrine of original sin — it is, he said, the only Christian doctrine that is verifiable by observation.

So what was God to do? Should God smite Noah and his family and be done with humanity? Should God just finish the job?

Well, you are here, so we know God didn't choose that.

Instead God made a decision. In fact, it was a covenant — which is like a promise, only holier, I suppose. It was the promise of a new day — a new era in which God would not punish all of creation for human sin. And God did not make this promise only with Noah and Noah’s family, but with every living thing that ever walked the earth — even you and even me.

Never again. That was God’s promise. Never again would God resolve to rid the world of human sin by wiping out humanity.

In the story, as a reminder to himself of his promise, God hangs a rainbow in the sky. Each time God would see that rainbow, God would remember how drowning his sorrows had only made his sorrows worse.

The Hebrew word for “rainbow” is actually just the word for “bow” as in bow and arrow, which was a weapon of war. The image, then, is of God hanging up his bow, as if to say, never again will I wage war against humanity.

We have a colloquial phrase in our vernacular that carries a similar weight when we say “bury the hatchet.” When we make peace with one another, we call it burying the hatchet.

The phrase comes from the historic practices of Native Americans, who relied on hatchets as a primary weapon of war. And when two warring tribes declared peace, they performed a ceremony in which the chief of each tribe literally buried their war hatchets together in the same hole as a sign and seal of the peace agreement.

When God hung that bow in the sky, it was God’s way of burying the hatchet... even if we never hung our bow up with him.

And that’s the thing — what God realized was that not even a flood could change the inclinations of the human heart. The human heart today is not that different than it was way back then. So God had a choice to make: either God could finish the job or God could change the inclinations of God’s heart.

According to this story, God chose the latter. God chose not to destroy humanity even if we deserved it, but to stay in relationship with us, even if it cost him, even if God had to change in order to do so, even if we would not.

Now, what word comes to mind when you hear the story told in this way — with all of its horror and all of its undying love?

Is it a word like grace? Or maybe a word like mercy? Is it a word like gentleness?

Craig Barnes tells this story:

“He was a burly, muscular lineman for his college football team. He spent years going nose to nose with opponents on the field, but now he was standing at the altar with his petite bride, reciting marital vows. He said most of the traditional things like ‘in sickness and health,’ but then added a clause no one saw coming. [Big burly lineman to his petite little bride, he said:] ‘and I will always be gentle with you.’” Craig Barnes says at that point, he started to tear up. And, frankly, who wouldn’t?

Friends, the promise God makes to every living thing here at the close of this story is the vow to always be gentle with us.

That doesn’t mean that our lives will be without struggle or hardship or even disaster – sometimes of our own making and sometimes of no fault of our own. But it does mean that we can trust God to be gentle with us – even when the world is not and even when we are not gentle with ourselves.

One of the other lectionary texts for this particular Sunday comes from 1 Peter and reads: “God waited patiently in the days of Noah... in which a few... were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you” (3:21).

Martin Copenhaver notes that “when we approach the waters of baptism we remember Noah and the flood. Because, both the flood story and baptism remind us that we stand in need of God’s cleansing. [However], in baptism God says, ‘Let’s start over,’ but this time, let’s do it one person at a time” (“Starting over,” *The Christian Century*, Feb. 21, 2006).

No more washing the human stain off of the face of the earth. Now God wants instead to wash the stain off of the human.

You see, it’s not about rains or floods or water even. It’s about God, and about us. And because it is about us, it’s about you... and me. And about how God chooses to be in relationship with us, even if it means that our unchanging God must change his own mind – in hopes that we might ask God to help us change the inclinations of our heart, too.

Maybe the rainbow isn’t just for God. Maybe the rainbow is for us, too. So that we might hang our bow in the sky and bury the hatchet with God.

Amen.