

How the Story Turns Out

This morning we begin a new adventure as we walk through scripture in a different way using the Narrative Lectionary. A lectionary, as you may know, is simply a plan for reading through scripture in an orderly fashion. (And we Presbyterians are big fans of order.) This 4-year plan begins each September with a story from the first eleven chapters of Genesis. We will spend the next few months in the Old Testament. Just before Christmas, we will turn to Matthew, the gospel for the year. For now we are back at near the beginning of the story of God and God's people, with Noah and those animals. [Read Genesis 6, 8, and 9, selected verses.]

James Poniewozik, a television critic wrote this week that while he likes a good prequel, he's a bit baffled by the abundance of them at the moment. There are prequels from the *Star Wars* franchise, *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *Lord of the Rings*. Disney now has one about Mufasa, the bad guy from the *Lion King* in the works. One would think that we would be tired of the same characters and plotlines, but:

[Audiences] keep turning up. And [he continues] I wonder if the complication and uncertainty of life is a part of prequels' appeal. The horizon is full of question marks — global, political and personal. We're overwhelmed with choice and with the unknown. With a prequel, you know — at least in broad strokes — what's coming. That can be a kind of comfort. Maybe prequels satisfy the same urge we felt in our earliest days as audiences, asking for one more read from a well-worn book at bedtime: Tell me a story where I know how it turns out.¹ “Everything was hunky dory, dory.” That's what the song says, after all. And that's what we want to hear, right? Of course, that's what we want to hear, what I want to hear. And it is what we want our children to hear, too. *Tell me a story where I know how it turns out*. And give me a happy ending while we're at it.

The biblical narrative was not written down in real time, of course. There was no court reporter recording every moment of creation, nor was anyone on the sidelines offering play-by-play when a catastrophic flood apparently hit much of the ancient near east. Numerous cultures have a flood story in their larger stories. Scholars believe that this story of the flood was written down during the Babylonian exile. This account of

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/10/briefing/tv-prequels.html>

Noah and the animals had been shared orally for generations, as this small band of people tried to make sense of the world around them and this God whom they trusted and worshiped, this God who had claimed them and called them. Once Jerusalem fell and the Israelites were decimated and scattered, the priests felt an urgent need to write these stories down, to preserve them as they tried to make sense of the devastation they had witnessed and to hold fast to their people's identity and history as God's people. Very little of what had happened made sense, very little around them offered true hope, so they leaned on the stories their parents and grandparents had passed down to them, trusting that the God who had brought new life out of devastation generations before could do the same with and for them. So, they told and re-told the stories, including this one. *Tell me a story where I know how it turns out.*

The language of this text is anything but subtle: "The Lord saw that humanity had become *thoroughly* evil on the earth and that *every* idea their minds thought up was *always completely* evil."² *Always* and *never* are dangerous words, fighting words. Marriage and family counselors the world over will tell you that these words should be used rarely, if at all. The writer of Genesis is not throwing these words around lightly. The story goes that humanity, the ones created in God's image are completely wrong-hearted and every idea they come up with is "always completely evil." They are so bad that God regrets creating them. *Regrets*. God is heartbroken. God is tempted to wipe the slate clean, not simply the human slate but the entire slate of creation. And then there's Noah.

We are not told why Noah gives God hope, just that he does. So, God makes a plan to save a remnant of humanity and a remnant of creation and start over. God tells Noah to build an ark and load up the animals in pairs, or by twosies, as we just sang. Our texts for this morning jump over the rain and the devastation, and yet we know they are there. Even if we would rather go straight to the happier bits. On Wednesday at bible study, we commented on what a hard story this is, and we wondered together about the persistence of Noah's ark as a theme for nurseries. I grew up singing "Rise and Shine," as I'm guessing many of you did. That happy song does not change the fact that this is a story of utter devastation, making it a story I'm inclined to gloss over with children, and maybe even myself. And yet, when the people of God were inspired by God to write down the

² Genesis 6:5, Common English Bible, emphasis added

crucial stories about who and whose they were and are, they wrote down some of the most difficult ones. Yes, we want to hear stories that we know turn out ok, but the turning out ok doesn't make much of a difference if it doesn't first line up with all that is *not* ok. The good news does not ring true if it does not acknowledge the bad news, too.

A few weeks ago, Dave and I watched *Come From Away*, a Broadway musical set in Gander, Newfoundland on September 11, 2001 and the few days that followed. As you may know, Gander is the site of a major airport once used for refueling large planes making transatlantic flights. Planes are more efficient now, so the airport rarely sees big planes anymore. That changed 21 years ago today. When the planes hit the towers and the Pentagon on that crisp blue-sky morning, planes in the air had to land as quickly as possible. Gander was a place that could handle an influx of big jets along with their passengers. So, the planes came, 38 planes in all. And the community responded in a mind-blowing way, with hospitality that would rival an army of southern aunts and mamas. The passengers were required to stay on board the planes while various government and security agencies figured out what the next safe thing was to do. When the passengers were permitted to leave the planes, they were put on buses that took them to shelters in and around Gander where they were finally able to see the tv reports for themselves. Before that they knew nothing but the confines of the cabins and the fear of not knowing what was happening or what would happen next.

The writer of Genesis makes it clear that the ark is afloat for a very long time, that this micro version of the entirety of creation is unmoored and uncertain for weeks and months on end. I'm guessing that feeling hit home with the exiles in Babylon. I'm guessing the passengers and their hosts in Gander could relate, too. And I suspect many of us may be able to relate as well. So perhaps it is good to return to this story and its devastation not because the bad news is otherworldly but because it hits so close to home. I confess that I was on the verge of loud ugly cries for much of *Come From Away*. This was the first performance with an audience since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. And it was recorded on the 20th anniversary of that awful day on the heels of a frightening and awful pandemic. This performance was poignant and hopeful, not unlike that olive leaf in the dove's beak. Many of us can recall where we were when we heard the news in 2001, and most of us can recall the moment when everything shut down in 2020. The fear, the loneliness, the anger, and the confusion

were palpable. *Come From Away* reminded me of all the emotions of those difficult days and how the simplest acts of kindness and care made life bearable in 2001 and in 2020. Honestly, it is quite often the small and simple acts of kindness that make life bearable today. That tiny leaf points to larger promises as well, of course. When the dove returns “grasping a torn olive leaf in its beak,” Noah knows that the flood is subsiding, that life will go on, that possibility and newness and a fresh beginning are possible. God has not given up on creation. Quite the opposite, really, thus the rainbow.

We love to tell the rainbow part of the story to our children and to ourselves. Genesis tells us that God places his bow, his weapon aside to remind us and to remind God’s self that God chooses life rather than destruction, that God loves creation more than God wants to start over without us. Every time we gather at that font, we are reminded that we enter a covenant that God establishes. In those waters, we proclaim both Christ’s death and his resurrection, we proclaim both the end of the world and the new beginning. God the almighty and heartbroken one promises not to respond to our self-serving, death-dealing, and destructive ways by wiping humanity from the face of the earth. That is not who God is. Instead, God the creator of all chooses to stick with us, to stand by us, and to redeem all of us and the entirety of creation.

Tell me a story where I know how it turns out. This is why we tell the story, the whole story, just as our ancestors did. This is why we rehearse and recall both the devastation and the promise. The rainbow makes little sense without the flood. This is why the world gasped when a rainbow appeared in the sky over Windsor Castle and over Buckingham Palace after Queen Elizabeth died on Thursday. It’s not that the Queen is more special than any other human, not really. No, those rainbows serve to remind us that amid tremendous change and turmoil, our story is not over yet, because God’s story is not over yet. And by the grace of God, we know how the story turns out. We know that God promises to keep choosing redemption over destruction and salvation over a clean slate. We know that God chooses and will keep choosing a messy, messed up, and heartbreaking creation over something newer or shinier. Every. Single. Time.

Thanks be to God. Amen.