

“The 3 R’s: Regret, Reset, Rainbow”
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Genesis 9:8-17 Sermon
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You may have noticed that the lectionary folks made a very interesting choice when editing today’s Old Testament reading. A very American choice even. They have cut away all the nasty bits from the Noah narrative: --We don’t have to hear what are perhaps the scariest words ever attributed to God, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” We don’t have to hear about God playing favorites: One man and his family alone deemed righteous and instructed to prepare for the coming flood. We don’t have to hear about the horrors of the flood itself, which wiped out all of creation except those few people and animals lucky enough to have been chosen to board the ark... And we don’t have to hear *anything* beyond the happily ever after ending of the rainbow covenant.

Which may invite us to ignore the fact that shortly after the family had re-established itself on dry land, Noah, the patriarch, got drunk, passed out, and was seen naked by his youngest son, who quickly shamed Noah by notifying his brothers. We can conveniently forget that, when Noah awoke and figured this out, he went so far as to curse his youngest, condemning him and his offspring to lives of slavery.—Maybe those editors knew that one year this day in the lectionary cycle--Lent 1B--and Noah--would fall on the same day as the Academy Awards. We Americans do love our happy endings. We’ve been known to go so far as to remake foreign movies and replace their tragic or unresolved endings with unrealistically neat, happy conclusions. As in the Wonderful World of Disney, all wicked stepmothers meet their demise.

Beasts are tamed into compliant, loving partners. Evil is handily conquered, and all is right with the world. Would that that were true here...

The stark reality is that, no sooner had God cleared the decks and sought to get a fresh start with creation, then human beings started to mess things up all over again. God had more or less destroyed the world for nothing. Noah wasn't necessarily any holier than all the people who'd been left behind. Noah was human, which, by definition, meant that he was mortal, fragile, susceptible to stress and temptation...

What a *heartbreaking* conclusion to reach *after* having violently taken *so many* lives—some innocent and some not, lives of beloved creatures made with God's own hands. ...Can we put ourselves in God's shoes and even begin to imagine how it would feel to bear the burden of responsibility for such a massive tragedy? Even *before* Noah had slipped up, God seems to have regretted the decision to hit the reset button and enact such terrible destruction. By the time dry land emerged, God had crafted a covenant with present *and future* creation, and even provided a visual memory cue. God laid down God's weapons, the bow and arrow, and replaced them with the rainbow, a colorful arc of light and hope. Never again would complete annihilation occur at God's hands. Interestingly, as covenants go, this one is rather one-sided—the onus is on God not to lose God's temper again and destroy all life on earth. And the rainbow sticky note in the sky, well, that's a reminder not necessarily for *us*, but for God to live into God's promise.

Admittedly, it's terrifying to contemplate a god who would unleash flood waters upon the earth as an expression of severe anger and disappointment. But the other side of this narrative is that this god was actually humble enough to admit to an error in judgment, to regret it, learn from it, and make it right with an eternal promise and a sign that would function not only as a reminder,

but as a source of comfort to creation whenever heavy rains fell again. This is a god who could realize the limitations of human beings yet knowingly opt to love and work with and through them, to err on the side of *grace* instead of judgment. This is a god who may not always love what we do, but loves us, all human beings and *everything else* that walks or swims or grows upon the earth. God's pact was as much for trout, wild turkeys and pine trees as it was for *homo sapiens*.

This, of course, is wonderful news for us, that future creation to which God had alluded! But, even though nothing was required of humanity in this rainbow covenant, there is still a sense of human responsibility implicit within it. That is, if God will never destroy the earth again, then, if destruction does come about, it will be us, creation's designated caretakers, who are to blame. In which case, we wouldn't have to *imagine* the terrible burden of guilt and regret God once carried, because it would be our own... And, indeed, it already is humanity's burden as we learn of more and more glaciers melting, presumably due to global warming; of oil-covered birds and marine life perishing after tankers spill their precious cargo; of fish rendered infertile by the presence of synthetic drugs in treated wastewater.

But the thing is, the damage is not limited to water or land, plants or animals. Our heavy use of the earth's resources has wreaked havoc upon our own species as well and disproportionately among the poor and people of color. Because they cannot afford to move to other places, many impoverished people live in the shadow of chemical plants, oil refineries, manufacturing facilities, or coal-fired power plants. In many cases, industries and mining such as mountaintop removal have moved into communities that are less affluent or do not have political clout.

Air pollution from these sources affects the overall health of children and adults, causes asthma and other respiratory issues, and in some cases contributes to higher cancer rates.¹ And that's just in our own country.

According to the UN Advisory Group on Greenhouse Gases, climate change precipitated by carbon emissions has already contributed to major humanitarian emergencies, including floods in Thailand and Pakistan, landslides in Latin American countries, and multi-year drought in the Horn of Africa that threatens the lives of millions. As if that weren't bad enough, current levels of warming have begun triggering major "tipping points" in the Earth's system – such as Arctic methane releases, Amazon dieback, and the loss of ice sheets.² ...Note again that it is poorer, developing nations that are disproportionately affected by these deadly consequences, even though it is developed nations like our own that are responsible for the bulk of the emissions. This is environmental injustice, yet another instance of the 1% prospering at the expense of the 99%. Except, in this case, you and I fall within that much maligned 1%.

Now I recognize that in this setting I am largely preaching to the choir; that there are many of you here who are far more knowledgeable on these topics than I. That, in fact, some of you have devoted your professional lives to advocating for and protecting the environment. My intention here is to connect those secular, science based commitments to our Judeo-Christian roots, so that when we hear our siblings on the Religious Right claiming dominion over all the earth, we have a theological leg to stand on. Although I believe it's what God had in mind all along, even with Adam and Eve, we are called to be human *stewards* of the diverse life upon this planet, *not*

¹ www.nrdc.org, www.foe.org

² "At Stake in Durban: A Climate Deal for the 1% or the 99%?" Durban. November 28, 2011. http://libcloud.s3.amazonaws.com/93/c7/e/868/Durban_Assessment_Agenda_for_the_1_or_99_28_Nov.pdf

heavy handed consumers. That role is perhaps more clearly delineated through Noah's shepherding role in the before and after-math of the flood.

Not only are we responsible for the vitality of creation, we are so obviously connected in a web of interdependence that it's in our best interest to care. And this is true not only from environmental and humanitarian perspectives, but from a political standpoint as well. Vast disparities in wealth and quality of life are not the stuff of peace and "never again" rainbow covenants. They are the seeds of hate, crime, violence, and war. Seeds that, unfortunately, survived the great flood. But that is *not* to say they are the will of God. If the flood's devastation left God full of regret, it's probably fair to say that environmental apocalypse at *anyone's* hand is not in the divine game plan and would, in fact, break God's heart were it to come to pass. Not only this, but the fact that God's covenant with Noah extended to *every* living thing would seem to point to regret on God's part for having favored the *few* over the *many*, for having allowed just *one* family and *a single pair* of each animal species to board the ark and escape the floodwaters. Now every one and every thing on earth is chosen. :)

This is a wonderful text for Lent not only because it invites us to contemplate and reset our relationships macroscopically--with all of nature and the world population in mind—but because God's personal growth and evolution within the story also provide opportunities for us to consider the state of our *interpersonal* relationships: Do *we* have regrets about how we have treated friends, family members, acquaintances, or enemies? Have we caused harm, intentionally or unintentionally? Has pride prevented us from confessing, apologizing, or making amends? Can we follow God's lead and humble ourselves in order to do those very things? Just like God, we can't guarantee that our doing the right thing will yield positive responses from those we

have hurt. That's not for us to determine. It's out of our hands. But we will have at least cleared the air within ourselves and contributed to the integrity of the environment without. On a somewhat larger scale, we can walk with and do mission and advocacy on behalf of the 99% whom we or our ancestors have harmed, however indirectly: African Americans, Native Americans, Africans, and so many others whose people were once enslaved or colonized by Europeans or European Americans, whose cultures and populations were decimated, who still struggle or are at war today, in the aftermath of those tragic histories.

If enough of us will commit with God to these reset buttons and rainbow paths, we just might write ourselves a Hollywood-style, unlikely ending after all. And not some animated fairy tale, but a drama cast with real, live, three-dimensional people, warts and all.

May it be so.