

From Hurt to Healing

Genesis 6:9-22, 7:24, 8:14-19; Matthew 7:21-29

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“And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days.”

When we think about the story of the flood and Noah's ark, it can be difficult to remember the fierceness of the story. One of the easiest themes for decorating in church classrooms is Noah's ark. And the Heifer Project – that wonderful organization that brings food and agricultural self-help in developing nations – has an “ark” that a congregation can purchase for \$5,000 sending the whole collection of animals needed by a particular village, and it uses the title World Ark for its monthly magazine.

UCC colleague Kate Huey writes on the denomination's website:

One of the most popular themes for nursery decorations is that of Noah's ark. Many infants gaze from their cribs at walls papered with cheery images of a friendly, bearded man and his family surrounded by pairs of charming little animals, all cute, all harmless, riding along on what looks like warm, cozy boat. (My granddaughter even has a toy Noah's ark, complete with ramp and an inexplicable little banner that waves merrily on top.) When I decorated my first office as a new pastor, I put up a “Noah's ark” plate over my light switch. My senior pastor took one look at it and said, “I've never understood why we tell children that story as if it's cute. I think they must find it at least a little frightening.” And I've never heard the story the same way since then.

I (Tim) don't remember the name of the film now, but I remember as a child seeing one of those epic Biblical films that in one scene depicted the story of Noah and the ark. Even as a child I remember struggling with the believability of the scene where all the animals willingly walked into the ark in their paired sets – lions in the pen next to the lambs – and the lions looking at them as fellow adventurers rather than dinner.

And, even more difficult, is what the text attributes to what God says in the Genesis reading. We heard these words a few moments ago:

“For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.”

This is a far cry from the nursery images of cheery, cute, and harmless animals. And it is hard to read this story today without hearing some irony in it in the aftermath of the damage from too much water like with Hurricane Katrina, or in a time when science is telling us that the waters of the earth may once again be rising. And just who would God choose to save from such a flood? Who among us is so “righteous” and “blameless in

their generation” and “walks with God” like a Noah? It counters the God that we have come to believe in and understand as a God of welcome and invitation and forgiveness.

“And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days.”

Biblical scholars tell us that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are a primordial pre-history which includes two distinct strands of oral tradition being woven in to one written account. And this early part of the Genesis narrative includes the creation story, the Garden of Eden story, the sibling rivalry between the brothers Cain and Abel, the story of the flood and Noah and the ark, and the story of the Tower of Babel.

These two ancient literary strands are called by scholars as the “J” or Yahwist source (which includes the creation story of Adam and Eve and is the older of the two strands), and the “P” or Priestly source (which includes the seven day creation story).

The older of “J” source is named for the word used for God – Yahweh, and it is an older folktale from the southern tribes that is also influenced by other stories – including those of creation and flood – that surrounded ancient Israel in the ancient Middle East.

The later “P” source was a compilation of the oral stories during the time of the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. If the “J” source is more interested in providing answers to life’s deepest questions, the “P” source is more concerned with God’s promises of hope for a community in exile longing for just that.

In the story of the flood, these two distinct strands can be seen through using different words for the name of God, different dating in the chronology of events, and different animals and even numbers of animals taken on to the ark.

In the Genesis reading from today whoever those folk are that choose the lectionary readings, they chose a series of selections of the Noah and the ark story that are all from the “P” or priestly tradition. The tradition of longing for return, of holding on to promise, of moving from hurt to healing.

“For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.”

Well, that is definitely the hurt. What about the healing? How about that rainbow?

There really is no way around the part of the story that has God so frustrated with the “corruption” of the earth that the only way forward is to cleanse the planet through flooding it and then to start all over again. It has given rise to the justification of violence as a way of solving the world’s problems, and even a theology of redemptive violence.

That theology does not work for me because it is always constructed by those who administer the violence, rather than experience it. Take the animals on the ark, for example. In the “J” strand there are seven pairs of “clean” animals that are taken on the

ark because there are times when those animals will be sacrificed to God. Now, wouldn't it be better to be one of the unnoticed "unclean" animals, rather than a "clean" animal only to survive 40 days on an ark with your predator in the next cage, only to be killed on the altar as a thank-you to God once you hit dry land?

A theology of redemptive violence is quite different depending on whether you're the animal that got a free ride or the one that was slaughtered at the end of the story.

We need to know the story. It matters. And we don't need to take it literally. That is simply too easy. The Gospel story about a house on the rock and a house on the sand is helpful to me in working through this problem.

Too often the house on the rock is interpreted as needing clear answers, a win-lose theology, and solid dogma in a world where the rains will come. By the same token the house on the sand is seen as the politically-correct, be-all-things-to-all-people-and-end-up-standing-for-nothing route in a world where the rains will come.

I would advocate the seemingly counter-intuitive route. By taking the Bible seriously, but not literally, we look at what scholars tell us, we study the text and the context, and we are like the house built on rock. We don't approach it like a magic cookbook that provides the correct answers or recipes. Then when the rains do come we may very well be disappointed, but we are never alone. A literal my-way-or-the-highway or don't-confuse-me-with-the-facts or black-and-white-answers-in-a-gray-world approach, I contend, can only lead us to disappointment and disillusionment when the rains come. When we follow this path, we are very much like the house on sand because we have made God into a protective figure that is supposed to keep us dry when the rains do come.

This second path keeps us wallowing in the hurt, while the first one offers the possibility of moving from hurt to healing.

When my daughter was a baby and we were encountering the rains of the world, I was struggling with what to read to her at bedtime because the fairy tales (like the Biblical tale of today) all seemed so violent and vengeful. The early-childhood education "scholar" of the church was so unhelpful by naming the very few appropriate books for children that I ended up feeling guilty about everything. The wise grandmother of the church listened to my questioning and gently asked me if Lauren was going to be exposed to the realities of the world anyway, wouldn't I want that to happen to her in the safety of my lap or with my voice? Not only was this reassuring, it gave me the confidence to wade through the waters that the rains of the world were sending.

The scholar or the grandmother? Scholarship is important, but it needs to be accompanied by wisdom. So I'll choose whatever includes wisdom – in this case the grandmother – every time. Amen.

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19

These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.

And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.

For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days.

In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh – birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth – so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth."

So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

Matthew 7:21-29

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'"

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat

on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Children’s Time

Noah hug self
 Ark pound with a hammer
 Animals make animal sounds
 Rain rain pattern with fingers
 Water make waves with hands
 Rainbow swing arm over head

God loved **Noah**.

One day, long ago, God told **Noah** to build a very big boat, called an **ark**.
The **ark** had to be big enough to hold **Noah** and his family,
and all of the **animals** because a big **rain** was coming.

God told **Noah** how to build the **ark**.

God told **Noah** how tall to make the **ark**.

God told **Noah** how long to make the **ark**.

God even told **Noah** where to put the door and window.

So **Noah** and his family built the great big **ark** just as God said.

When the **ark** was ready, God told **Noah** to gather up **animals** to take into the **ark**.

God meant ALL of the **animals**:

huge **animals** and tiny **animals**,
loud **animals** and quiet **animals**;
wild **animals** and tame **animals**.

Noah had a big job to do:

Noah and his family had to gather **animals** from the air, like birds and butterflies
and **animals** from the land, like toads and tigers.

Two of each **animal**, and all of them would need food,
so **Noah** put lots of food in the ark, too.

Just when everyone and everything was on board the **ark**, the **rain** started to fall.
It **rained** all day and all night.

It **rained** for days and days.

It **rained** for weeks and weeks.

It **rained** until there was **water** everywhere.

Finally, when the **rain** stopped and the **water** started to go down,

God told **Noah**, his family, and all the **animals** to leave the **ark** and return to land.

Huge **animals** and tiny **animals**,
loud **animals** and quiet **animals**,
wild **animals** and tame **animals** –

every kind of **animal** filled the world again.

Then God made a promise to **Noah**.

God promised never to stop loving and caring about the world and all its creatures.
God said, "I promise that I will always be with you."
Noah, his family, and the **animals** looked up and saw a beautiful **rainbow**.
That beautiful **rainbow** would always remind them of God's love and care.