

“Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. . . . 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.’” (Gen. 6:11, 13)

It’s shocking how quickly things move from creation to destruction in Genesis; only 3 chapters separate the two stories. In Genesis 1, the earth begins in chaos: “a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,” (1:2). The earth is moved by God’s creating word into the order and unity of Creation, and then, in chapter 6, the earth is returned to chaos by the flood.

God undoes creation as deliberately and systematically as He made it. On the second day, God separated the waters by a dome that God called Sky, separating the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And on the third day, God gathered the waters under the sky together, creating dry land.

Then, on a day certain—the 600th year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the 17th day of the month—“on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth and the windows of the heavens were opened.” The waters that God had separated by the dome of the sky in creation came back together, to make the flood. And, in language that echoes the creation story, “every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth.” (7:23)

Waters, of sea and of flood, are symbols of chaos in the imagery of ancient Israel. We can well understand this image today, as we have watched images of the cyclone’s destruction in Myanmar less than a month ago, on top of images of the tsunami, and of New Orleans, flooded by Katrina and failed dikes. We have seen the chaos not only of violent storms and rising flood waters, but also of their aftermath: desperate people on roofs, clinging to trees; drinking water contaminated by corpses and pollutants of all kinds; houses and fields washed away; people hungry, helpless, and undone. The waters bring chaos and death.

The story of the flood in Genesis is made up of two strands of tradition, one ancient and one composed or finalized during the Exile. This is the one we heard part of today, from the time when Israel was in despair in Babylon. Jerusalem, the Temple, their whole way of life had been destroyed, and the people were threatened by chaos. For the Israelites in Babylon, the Exile was a Flood, that swept away their known world. The story of the Flood was, in part, the writer’s reflection on the disaster that had befallen the people.

God’s purpose for creation was that it be ordered and unified, at one within itself and with the Creator. But by the time just before the Flood, the earth was tearing itself

apart with violence. All flesh had become corrupt in God's sight. Rather than allow the violence to continue, God determined to put an end to it all. All except Noah. Better to start over, with only Noah, "a righteous man" who "walked with God" and did all that God commanded him.

"Noah" means "favor, rest, serenity." A "relief from the sorry results of human ingenuity," OT scholar Walter Brueggemann calls Noah¹ He is a symbol of hope in a dis-ordered world, who shows that it is possible to live a faithful life, even in the midst of a violent world that is alienated from God.

I remember being intrigued as a college student, when I took a class in ecology. I had seen the natural world as just generally "nature," never gave any thought to its all being intricately interrelated. It turns out, of course, that there are ecosystems all around us, areas of interdependent species, animal and vegetable, connected and dependent on each other, on the kind of soil, the climate, all sorts of things. Every living thing has its niche in an ecosystem; all living things fit together to make a whole. (They teach this in high school now, maybe even in elementary school; back then it was an emerging field.)

Theologically, too, all living things fit together to make a whole, as in the story of the Flood. When the flood waters had receded and the earth was dry, Noah with his sons, his wife, 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." (9:19) As they had shared the ark—all of them together, humans and animals, but each in their own places in the lower, second or third deck—they all went out, in order, to share the earth and make a new beginning.

It *was* a new beginning. But not everything had changed. God recognized that "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth." Even the flood had not changed our inclination to disregard God's purposes and follow our own agendas instead.

But *God* was changed by the cosmic destruction (7:23). God resolved "never again to curse the ground because of humankind" or "ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." (8:21) God blessed Noah and his sons, as he had blessed humankind at creation, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (9:1; 1:28) And God again gave humankind responsibility over all living things. And all this despite the persistence of human sin, and the expectation that it would continue. Something in God had changed.

In the years since my introduction to ecology, awareness has mounted about the particular and vast human impact on the environment. Our impact has been not only in pollution of air and waters and destruction of habitats, but also more cosmic. Our carbon emissions, by-products of our progress, production and high-speed travel, have depleted the ozone layer, and are warming the globe. We can only hope that the realization that

¹Walter Brueggemann, Genesis (), p. 70.

we are in the same boat with the whole of creation has come soon enough to stop *our* undoing of the created order on earth.

The story of the Flood is a stark reminder that human actions have consequences not only for ourselves but for the whole earth and all her creatures. You don't need to be persuaded that stewardship of Creation is our responsibility, though. Perhaps what is called for are words of encouragement and hope, as the story of Noah was encouragement for Israel

in exile. Devastation and death are not the end, even on earth. It is God's desire to restore all things and not to destroy.

In Matthew, at the end of the collection of Jesus' teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (7:21) Invoking the name of the Lord over what we have done is not what's called for. Indeed, mighty acts done in his name are not required; only to hear his words and act on them. All we are required to do as disciples is to bring our faith to bear on the hurt of the world. Walk the walk, don't just talk the talk.

You might be encouraged to hear that when the more than 600 bishops of the Anglican communion may get together in July at the Lambeth Conference in England, they will be walking the walk with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Rowan Williams, has announced the walk to demonstrate the Anglican Communion's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals.

Walking through central London with other faith leaders, in all their diversity and with all their differences, they will witness to the work already being done by the Church to further the MDGs. They will also commit themselves to put more pressure on their governments to fulfill those governments' funding promises for the MDGs. In working together to heal the earth and the real problems of extreme poverty and hunger and achieving environmental sustainability, they may also decide to learn to live with their differences.

Whatever else may happen at the world wide gathering of Anglican bishops next month, in this action they have an opportunity to go beyond invoking the name of the Lord in support of their positions, and to be agents of healing and justice. Instead of a shipwreck, they may make a new beginning and help to bring about real change.

In healing the earth, we make real the words of Jesus, and may find that we have been healed ourselves. It is all interrelated.