

THE RAINBOW

Even as a child, I found the flood narrative to be disturbing. It seemed that most people, (including the adults), concentrated on the ark, the animals, the rainbow and the promise by God never to destroy the earth again. I always thought that after such a horrific outburst of temper, a promise and a rainbow was the LEAST that God should provide. As a child I found the story to be terrifying. Because of the unfinished, open and innocent nature of children's lives, as an adult I find the concept of God willfully punishing babies and little children for the sins of their parents to be repugnant. *In this post 2004 Tsunami world, the true horror of the story of the flood has become real to us through images brought to our living rooms on television. Men, women, children and babies being carried to their death by the power of water run amok.*

Carol Gilligan, an ethicist, claims that this story was primarily one of the destructiveness of regret. As I do more research I have begun to believe that she is correct; but I would also argue that it is a story of the destructiveness of profound and terrible grief.

This story can be analyzed at many levels in terms of critical analysis. For example, historical criticism may offer an analysis that some kind of flood actually did occur in this area of the world and the story is an attempt to make meaning out of a cultural seminal memory. However, that is not our concern. What is a reality for us as readers is that, whatever happened, the ancient writer believed the author of the event to be God. *Like Marcus Borg, I too believe that myth, is the telling of a truth that can not be told in any other way.*

The Story

At the beginning of chapter six we are told that wickedness has come to the earth, (vs. 5). The term "earth" is meant to be understood as the very soil or ground from which Adam was made.¹ Not only is humankind wicked but the earth itself is corrupt in God's sight and filled with violence, (v. 11). The exact nature of the violence and wickedness is not defined. It makes one wonder, however, if the cumulative activities of the inhabitants of the earth could be any

¹Robert Forrest, "Paradise Lost Again: Violence and Obedience in the Flood," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, no. 62:3-18, Je 1994.

more violent than the destructive act of flooding an entire world. They must have been **really** bad. Questions I continue to bring to the text is how could the children have been defined as bad? Were even the little ones beyond the pale and therefore unredeemable?

We are given some access to God's feelings. God is "sorry" that God has made humankind and decides to "blot" out all of Creation: all human beings, wild animals, domestic animals, all flying, moving creatures - even the very young. Why? God had decided to create humankind in God's *own image* and things are not working out quite like God had planned. The creatures have minds of their own and they are not of God's mind set. As Carol Gilligan points out, God has regret. God also experienced great anger. It seems like the anger that all human beings in intimate relationship feel at some level when they realize their loved one is different or "other" than themselves. God is new at this relationship stuff and appears to be going through a stage of narcissistic omnipotence - the consequences of which can be deadly when experienced by the truly omnipotent.

God decides to save one man, Noah. The Hebrew word for "Noah" means "man of the ground"; this is the only time in the Hebrew scriptures in which such a term is used to describe a farmer.² The implications are clear. If Adam, the first man, was made from the ground, Noah is to be the new first man of the ground. Noah is a "righteous" man, and as such, he "walks with" God (v.9). What makes him righteous? He is obedient. This is his most outstanding quality. In contrast to Adam and Eve, he is consistently obedient to all of God's commands.³ Strict obedience requires the suppression of one's imagination, creativity and intimate connection with others. This will be problematic for Noah and his family. God tells Noah that he is going to destroy the world but Noah will be saved along with his immediate family. Noah does not question God. Chapter six ends with the assertion that Noah "did all that the Lord commanded him." Noah does not plead for members of his extended family, his neighbours or for anyone in his community. He blithely accepts that all are to perish, including the children his own children must have known and played with. He builds the ark, collects the animals, his family and various and sundry supplies. Three out of the four paragraphs in Chapter seven end with an

² Anthony Tomasino, "History repeats itself: the "fall" and Noah's drunkenness," Vetus testamentum, (42:128-130), Ja 1992, p. 129.

³Forrest, p. 3.

affirmation that Noah did what the Lord had commanded him to do. The third adds a final sentence which outlines God's bittersweet reward for Noah's dutiful compliance, - "The Lord shut him in, (v. 16)." In a *rudderless* boat Noah and his family were to spend ten months, completely dependent upon God's will. They free floated in this life-boat of a prison.

The final paragraph in chapter seven outlines in repetitive, unceasing narrative the complete, intentional annihilation of the earth and all its inhabitants.

And *all flesh died* that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land *in whose nostrils was the breath of life died*. *He blotted out* 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. (7:21-23)

What could it have been like for Noah and his family? During one March break years ago, I spent an afternoon watching *Titanic* with my oldest son. (It was his fourth time). We were discussing the fact that a person actually has a lot less time to survive in those North Atlantic waters than suggested in the movie. In Newfoundland, the Coast Guard continually warn fishermen to wear their survival suits because they claim that a person can only remain conscious in those freezing waters for a maximum of five minutes. That aside, the movie shots of the fifteen hundred people flailing and screaming in the water were riveting in the absolute horror and panic they depicted. A flood of the proportions described in Genesis would have been exponentially horrific. Indeed, we have seen these images ourselves in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. The temperature of the water would not have afforded the people a quick death as in the movie *Titanic*. The rate of the rising of the water as related in the Genesis story seems to suggest gradation. All of us have seen film footage of the flooding of New Orleans. As with floods created in our own time, people in Noah's age would have had time to try to reach higher ground - hills, trees, roofs. As the deluge continued, people would have tried to grab onto anything that floated. Despairing parents would have tried to save children. Perhaps many of

Noah's family, friends and neighbours desperately swam toward the ark and screamed to be let in. Perhaps some people lasted as long as a couple of weeks. The noise coming from outside of the ark must have been unbearable for the small family in the big boat. The silence must have been worse - for as the silence grew, they must have known that death was more complete.

How does an individual survive such an experience? How does a family survive such an ordeal? How did Noah's wife and children feel about permanently losing their friends, community, house, home, *world*? How did they feel about Noah, the patriarch of such obedience that he almost seemed an automaton, (hardly the emotionally available parent or spouse). How did they cope with the death cries? Surely the only way to survive is to separate - separate oneself from one's family, from the past, from the future, from oneself. There can be no attachment to the "other" when trying to survive such profound trauma. The first way of coping with such an massive assault on one's self must be shock and profound numbness. There was probably a lot of work to do on the ark. The care and upkeep of the animals and the physical needs of the humans onboard. Did they lose themselves in activity? Did they talk at all? Under the shock - the level of anxiety must have been extreme. If Noah is the example of what such a powerful and angry God held up as an example of who was worthy, did they wonder if a life of non-creative, unquestioning obedience would be enough to live for? Did they question just what kind of existence were they being saved *for*? Emotionally, psychologically, socially, spiritually and physically their landscape would be quite literally radically changed forever.

What about God? This God who made human beings in the Self image and walked and talked with them - did God miss them at all? When God experienced the complete devastation wrought by God's anger and disaffection, did God experience grief? Did God experience numbness, shock, pain? Perhaps. Chapter 8, verse 1 states "But God *remembered* Noah and

all...that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth and the waters subsided.” It is almost like a distracted and preoccupied God forgot Noah for a while.

The scene of wreckage and devastation that awaited Noah and his family would have been traumatic in the extreme. Fires consume, earthquakes crumble the landscape - but a flood obliterates. Floods stir up and lay a thick mass of organic waste everywhere. If the aftermath was like any other flood, the first life to emerge from the chaos would have been insects living off of the dead stuff. The stench of rotting and putrefying debris would have surrounded the new “first” family.

Interestingly, the first spontaneous act of Noah in the entire story is to offer God a sacrifice upon disembarking from the ark.⁴ Most authors seem to think that it was an indication of Noah’s faithfulness that he thought to do so. After he witnessed the spectacle of the power and ire of God, Noah’s action seems merely prudent to me.

And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from its youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.(8:21)

Again we seem to be witnessing the activities of a distracted God. Could God have smelled Noah’s sacrifice and experienced an upsurge of grief? As with human beings who can be deluged with emotive memories when exposed to certain smells, God smells the sacrifice, (reminiscent, no doubt, of untold previously offered to God), and seems filled with regret. God changes as a result of God’s grief. God seems to “see” the creatures created in the Self image and finally accepts their “otherness.” God renounces violence as a response to the wickedness of human beings and decides to stick with them for the long haul. God therefore makes the first

⁴Devora Steinmetz, “Vineyard, Farm, and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History,” Journal of Biblical Literature, 113:193-207, Sum 1994, p. 11.

covenant - a promise never to destroy the earth again. “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you...that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:9-10) There is an interesting change, however, in the relationship between God and human beings. Steinmetz observes that God no longer administers day to day justice with human beings as has formerly happened, (eg. the punishment of Cain):

Human beings have responsibility for carrying out justice, but no longer will humankind hear the voice of God walking through the garden or be divinely protected from fellow human beings. God, after the flood, hands over governance of the world to Noah and his family.⁵

It seems that a part of God has died with the death of God’s children in the flood. The post deluvian God is no longer intimate with human beings in the same way. Something has been lost; but something has been gained. God no longer *projects* onto human beings - God has learned and grown through God’s grief.

The same can not be said for Noah and his family. The second spontaneous thing that Noah did was to plant a vineyard. On the proceeds of the harvest he got drunk and passed out. This is probably a fairly understandable response to such a profound grief. He intentionally numbed himself through self medicating substance abuse. Noah’s son Ham sexually violates his father as he lays unconscious, vulnerable and prostrate. The name “Ham” is closely related to the word “violence” in Hebrew.⁶ Due to the phraseology and connections to other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is generally accepted by many biblical scholars that Ham had a violent

⁵Steinmetz, p. 196-7.

⁶Forrest, p. 2.

sexual encounter with his father.⁷ In referring to same sex rape, Marie Fortune states that:

When a person feels powerless in regard to controlling his life, he can defend against the discomfort of such an experience by asserting control over someone else. In this way, he comes to feel more powerful than his victim and thus compensates for his feelings of inadequacy. This is particularly evident in prison rape, where the offender's tenuous sense of identity, personal control and self-esteem are further diminished by his incarceration. Sexual assault becomes a means of compensating for his sense of helplessness and vulnerability and of retaliating for his feelings of resentment and anger.⁸

The ark functioned as a prison, the inhabitants being “shut in” by no less than God. The rage and anger generated by the massive and acute pain felt by Ham as a result of the experience of surviving the flood, seems to have taken the form of sexually assaulting his emotionally unavailable, grief stricken father. When Noah awakens and realizes what Ham has done he banishes Canaan, Ham's child, forever from the land. He decrees that the descendants of Canaan shall be the lowest of slaves to his uncle's descendants. The punishment is made worse in its context of being placed alongside the blessings of Japheth and Shem, Canaan's uncles and Ham's brothers, (9:26-27). Ham's punishment for violating the boundaries between parent and child is to see his child punished, (which is surely worse than enduring punishment oneself). It is the first pronouncement of punishment by a human being in the Hebrew Scriptures and it is terrible in its implications.

Noah was told that because he was obedient to God, he was going to be chosen to save his family from the flood. They were to survive. However, in order to survive Noah and his family had to alter their emotional and psychic worlds such that it was impossible to survive

⁷Forrest, p. 15.

⁸Marie M. Fortune, Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1983), p. 181.

intact as a family. The pain that all had to endure altered them in such a way that relationships with one another became problematic - attachment to other human beings became extremely risky. The loss that they all experienced and had to interpret in their own individual way, was monstrously massive. The wounds that Noah and Ham received during the experience appear to be so deep as to be almost psychically unsurvivable. Post-deluvian, their emotional, psychic and social landscape is so different as to make meaningful, caring exchange nonsensical. Finally, even their physical landscape becomes foreign, one being forever forbidden to enter into the other. It seems logical that the story of such radical disconnection is immediately followed by the story of the tower of Babel in which all of humanity is prevented from speaking a common language with one another. It seems that we have been struggling ever since to learn to communicate with one another about the various experiences of loss each one of us has.

Hope:

I have a certain amount of admiration for Noah during the latter part of this story. He seems to have changed for the better. No longer unquestioningly obedient he begins to spontaneously act and react. When Ham violates him, he seems to behave better than his God. Noah banishes Ham's grandson and curses him to a life of slavery. Although certainly not an outcome bespeaking of family health and reconciliation the fact remains that *he doesn't kill Ham*. After the example he had just seen in terms of the genocidal flood as a vehicle of God's wrath, it must have been tempting to murder Ham in a fit of rage. We are not privileged with any more information about the rest of Noah's life upon the earth. However, it seems clear that something is moving and changing within Noah as a result of his terrible experience. There can be the seeds of hope within such change.

There is more hope in this story. I am glad God was sorry. I am glad God is filled with

regret. I am grateful that God seems grief “struck”; although it seems a bit too little and a bit too late. The hope lies within the reality that God is capable of learning. This is a rash God, an impulsive God, a young God. Indeed, if we are made in God’s image and our psychic, emotional, physical and spiritual health depend on continuous learning and integration of experiences, especially experiences of grief, then that would seem to indicate that this is one of God’s Self tasks as well. Indeed, as one reads on through the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures it seems certain that God continuously recommits to and intensifies God’s relationship with humanity and the earth, through the losses and the grief.

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