

Lent 1, February 18, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Genesis 9:8-17, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

There's strong archaeological and geological evidence that the eastern Mediterranean was struck by a number of tsunamis – called “paleo-tsunamis” – within the last 10,000 years. There's also evidence that part of that region experienced catastrophic flooding as the consequence of the ice-melt at the end of the last Ice Age about 11,000 years ago. We know how devastating tsunamis can be – the 2004 Sumatran one killed over 300,000 people. One in southern Italy in 1908 killed more than 75,000 and almost wiped the city of Messina off the face of the earth.

The biblical story of the flood – of which today's Old Testament is the last part – most likely came from similar Mesopotamian flood stories, and those stories were probably rooted in the actual experience of a devastating natural disaster or disasters, like a tsunami or an ice-melt induced flood.

After any natural disaster, the survivors always seem to engage in some significant soul-searching: “why was I spared? What does it mean? Is God trying to tell me/us something? What should I do now?” Almost always their lives are changed forever by their experience. We've seen the beginnings of that playing out in Florida – and, now, across our nation – after the Parkland school shooting.

These sort of events – natural or human-perpetrated – enter the human psyche, and the really big ones become a part of our shared memory – cultural symbols with enormous power, events that carry an emotional and psychological freight that goes way beyond even the immediate and terrible consequences of the moment.

Such events can also serve as metaphors, allegories, vehicles that sum up a class of things, that communicate in a brief word or phrase something much more profound and complex. For example, you could describe the events at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School last week as a “Collumbine moment” and even if you didn't know what happened in Parkland from news reports, you'd know what happened. “Collumbine” has become a metaphor, a symbol, for the violent perpetration of white male rage in the context of our schools – just like the phrase “going postal” stands for a particular and unique form of violence.

The story of “The Flood” told in Genesis is intended in just that way: as shorthand – a metaphor or allegory pointing to something else, something deeper, something loaded with profound meaning. Those of our brothers and sisters in the fundamentalist churches who get hung up on seeing the flood as a literal event miss the bigger point. In the greater scheme of things, the story of the Flood isn't, in the end, about a flood at all. Nor is it about a vindictive God giving up on humanity and engaging in ethnic cleansing on a planet-wide scale – such a view is culturally and temporally specific to that ancient era when the Flood story was first recorded many thousands of years ago.

For us, the Flood story is about trying to understand and explain the ways human lives can be devastated by our life choices, the ways we inflict on each other the smaller and greater wounds

that make up life, the way we can be swept away by forces too powerful for us to resist. And it invites us – the survivors of life – to engage in some significant soul-searching: why have I been spared? What does this story – whether it’s the Flood story, or the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School story – what does this story mean for me? Is God, through this story, trying to tell me/us something? What should I do now?

These are Lenten-like questions. And answering them will likely mean that our lives will be changed forever.

Centrally, the Flood story is also about something else. It’s about what God promises us in the face of such devastation. What is that promise? It’s about offering relationship, and freely-granted forgiveness; it’s about wholeness and, ultimately, about universal healing. Despite the reality of the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual destruction that we humans visit on each other, and on our planet, God makes a covenant with all creation, going beyond humankind to embrace the non-human world.

The flood reminds us of something else, too. We are living in a precarious time for our planet, politically, economically, and ecologically. And, by our action or inaction, we are a part of that problem. The Flood calls us to hear and then respond to our self-destructive behaviors by sharing and acting on the good news we receive – with great humility, recognizing our complicity in injustice and ecological destruction. That is also part of what this Lenten season is about.

If, in the footsteps of Jesus in today’s gospel, we, too are to proclaim the good news, then “our good news, inspired by God’s images of hope amid threat, must go beyond self-interest to provide wholeness for humankind and non-human creation in all its wondrous and threatened diversity. We need divine refreshment and spiritual insight to find our own way through the wilderness[es of our own making, and into the promise of God’s good future].” (Bruce Epperly).

That promise is, in the Genesis story, symbolized by the rainbow. A rainbow is “An arc of spectral colors, usually identified as red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, that appears in the sky opposite the sun as a result of the refractive dispersion of sunlight in drops of rain or mist.” Well, yes. But – like a literal description of the Flood – that misses the point.

Last Tuesday I was driving down the hill toward the Mukilteo ferry dock with light rain falling. It was mostly overcast but off in the distance there was some blue. And planted in the water between the ferry dock and Hat Island was the solid, enormous base of a rainbow. That was – as it is for most of us, I suspect – a profoundly thrilling, breath-taking moment, when dim grey light is broken apart – or really, broken open – saying that even amid the gloom, glory exists, a glory waiting every moment for the opportunity to reveal itself in its simple bright-hued grandeur, the eternal promise that light conquers darkness and always will.

The rainbow. Mark, in today’s gospel passage, doesn’t give us an outline of Jesus’ message, and on this day that’s probably the right thing to do. What his gospel – and all our central stories tell us is what Jesus does, and that’s much more important. They tell us that in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus identifies with human suffering, and through the cross provides a pathway to

healing. Jesus is the message. Jesus embodies the God of Genesis's promise. Jesus is the rainbow, the rainbow who says that even amid the gloom, glory exists, a glory waiting for the opportunity to reveal itself in its simple bright-hued grandeur, the eternal promise that light conquers darkness and always will, a glory that waits for us finally to have eyes to see it, and to respond. This Lenten journey is, in part, about learning to have those eyes to see.

Make the gloomy journey of Lent; watch for the rainbow at its end, and embrace and share its simple bright-hued grandeur that can transform us, and, through you, through me, through us, can transform our world too.