From Destructive Flood to Compassionate Covenant

Narrative Lectionary Year 1

September 9, 2018

Genesis 6: 16-22; 9: 8-15

When I was training for ministry in the mid 80’s I was quite an activist. It was a turbulent time in the world, the US was involved in many Central American countries, including Nicaragua and El Salvador and the anti-interventionist movement was strong. The Cold War was in full force and the anti-nuclear peace movement was active. I marched in International Women’s Daymarches with my feminist friends. Aparthied in South Africa was still in place and boycotts of companies like Shell was something I supported. Many weekends, I would be with my friends at a protest in Toronto, at some of them I was supporting those who had chosen to respond with civil disobedience. There was much to be concerned about in the world, and my faith led me to an active response. While there is still much to be concerned about in the world, and I may feel just as strongly about the issues, the way I respond has changed.

It appears in the story of Noah and the flood, God changes too. The story begins with God being grieved in God’s heart that the creation of humankind had turned to wickedness and God was sorry to have created them. So God decides to destroy the humans through a flood except for a righteous man Noah and his family. They can start over with two of every animal. By the end of the flood, God makes a promise not to destroy the earth or humanity again. God makes this promise, not because humanity has changed but because God has changed. After the flood, God acknowledges that humans will still spill blood among one another. God decides to commit to the broken, sinful world of humans. God moves from vengeance and violence to grace and mercy. This is evident in the words attributed to God in Isaiah 54: 9-10:

This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you

God’s love is greater than whatever anger or despair God may feel.

These are interesting perspectives. Most of us have grown up with a teaching that God does not change. A traditional view of God is as unchanging, immovable, perfect, all knowing or ommipotent. So it can be a challenge to hear that God changed. God created us in God’s image, we can think for ourselves and change our minds, is it possible for God to be similar? What might it mean for us that God can change? Maybe it is also that God changes with us. We are not the same as we were thousands of years ago. God responds to us differently now as we change. Maybe God is adaptable.

Another view is that our understanding of God changes. Including in the story as the writers of Genesis or those who were writing down the story from the oral tradition were trying to understand the flood experience in the context of God, and the fact that there were other flood stories, and responses from their gods. Maybe they wanted their story to portray a different understanding of God. Most gods of the time were angry and vengeful. Maybe they wanted the God of Noah to be portrayed as more loving and compassionate in the end. These are all wonderings. The bottom line is that we now understand and know God as a God of grace and mercy, even in the face of sin and evil in humanity.

There continues to be in this passage and in our tradition a message that we, humanity are evil or sinful. I still struggle with the perspective that we are inherently or born sinful. I cannot see sin being present in a newborn child. As we grow, we make mistakes, we do sin, but the question remains, are we more likely to sin, than to choose good? I have seen too much good in the world, even in the midst of evil and sin, and prefer to believe that we are more good than sinful. That does not take away from the fact that we are broken, that we do sin, that there is evil. God is with us through this, and is gracious and forgiving. In preparing for this sermon, I read an interesting story of Einstein’s perspective on the question of evil and the existence of God. There is also a popular video that is circulating around the internet that shows a young Albert Einstein disputing with a teacher who claims that God created evil and therefore God is evil or does not exist. The young Einstein points out that cold does not exist (according to physics), rather it is the absence of heat. Darkness doesn’t exist because it is the absence of light. It is then reasonable to assume that God did not necessarily create evil, but rather evil is the absence of God’s love in the heart of people. Now this story has been fact checked and there is no evidence that Einstein was ever a part of this story. The essence of it is still interesting and helpful. Evil is the absence of God, or of God’s love. It is when we shut out God and love from our lives that we can find ourselves in sin. I also want to distinguish between sin and evil. I think we could understand sin as a turning away from what is right, often by mistake or through inaction or not thinking or feeling. I think evil is when we do this intentionally, over and over again, without remorse, regret, or confession. I have often thought of hell as the absence of or separation from God. We are human and will make mistakes, we will fall to sin. The message from our passage today, is that God’s love and mercy is with us always. God also calls us to do better.

In the Working Preacher commentary, Kathryn Schifferdecker writes regarding God’s change of mind: “God still takes evil seriously; but God will deal with human evil in other ways from now on: by calling Abraham and Sarah and blessing them to be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-3), by calling the Israelites to be a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). God will call prophets and priests, shepherds and vine-dressers, to proclaim God’s judgment and God’s mercy, and to call a people into covenant loyalty. Over and over and over again.” So rather than punishing, God calls us to be our best self, encouraging and inspiring us to be better, to be loving just and loyal. God also calls us out through the prophets and others when we are turning away and need to do better.

Following the flood, realizing that the act of destroying the earth and its creatures did not solve the problem, God makes a covenant with Noah and all of creation. It is a promise not to flood the earth again. It is a covenant that signifies that God is in sacred relationship with humanity and all its creatures and that God desires creations’ flourishing. The covenant or promise is both ways, we too are to be committed to the flourishing of creation. God will never again destroy the earth, and it is up to us as well to care for the earth. The reality of our actions are also that there are consequences for our exploitation and abuse of the resources entrusted to us. Today, these consequences can be identified as climate change. There have been dramatic changes to the climate in the past, however, not with the rapidity of the changes that we are experiencing, and the planet has survived. The species on the planet may not have, but the earth did. The earth is able to adapt. The question is are we? Many are beginning to believe it is too late but humans are a resilient species. We can change if we are motivated and have the will. The question is will we get there? Even for someone as committed to addressing and as concerned about climate change as I am, I know there is so much more I could be doing. It is too easy and convenient to not make big changes in my life that I know would help the earth. I do hope that we will find the motivation and will soon, myself included! Whatever happens, we know that we are not alone, God is with us and wants the best for us and all creation. May that be the motivation for us to consider ways we can change and make a difference for all creation.

Since my activist days of the 80’s, I may not have changed my positions on a lot of the issues, but how I address them has changed. Since being in ministry, having children, and getting older, I have learned there are many ways to address social concerns. Education is a key one, and sharing information with one another. I still go to protests now and then, but I also have conversations with people around me about the concerns in the world. I have opportunity sometimes to share them here, through a sermon, admittedly, sometimes, too passionately or other forms in worship! We all change, hopefully for the better, getting wiser and learning from our mistakes as we get older. God knows we are not perfect and is with us in our imperfections, with grace and mercy, forgiving us when we stray, and guiding and encouraging us to be and do better. Often this can be experienced through the love and support, wisdom and challenge of those around us. May we embrace God’s grace and mercy when we fall short. May we take to heart the challenges of living faithfully, in covenant with creation, to care for one another and all creatures in our care.

Gods covenant is with the whole earth

The earth will survive, we need to adapt. Consequences of our actions