

**“Noah’s Promise”**

**Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ**

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**Genesis 6-9 excerpts**

I would like to begin today with a prayer from the UN Environmental Sabbath program. Please pray with me:

**We have forgotten who we are.**

We have alienated ourselves from the unfolding of the cosmos

We have become estranged from the movements of the earth

We have turned our backs on the cycles of life.

Now the forests are dying

And the creatures are disappearing

And the humans are despairing.

**We have forgotten who we are.**

We ask forgiveness

We ask for the gift of remembering

We ask for the strength to change. Amen.

In the beginning, in the primal darkness, on the day before the first day, there were only three—*Elohim*, Earth, and the waters. And the breath of *Elohim* (which is the Hebrew word for God) moved over the waters which covered Earth. “On the third day, Earth [was] revealed, the hidden [was] made visible, the mysterious [was] uncovered. On the third day, Earth [rose] from the waters, an epiphany from below—a geophany.” So says Norman Habel, in his commentary on Genesis in what is called the ‘Earth Bible’ series. The geophany, according to Habel, is the heart of the first creation story, for all life depends upon the revelation of this dry domain rising

from the waters—the fertile, habitable Earth. And God created life, and behold, it was very good.<sup>1</sup>

But times change.

In a time of great forgetting, the earth is filled with violence, the creatures are dying, and the waters are rising. The life systems of the planet are overcome by destructive forces unleashed by recalcitrant human beings, and the earth faces the prospect of uncreation, the return to chaos. And the tears of God are flowing. It's the story of our time, and it's also a very old story.

It's time to take a fresh look at the story of Noah and the flood; and putting aside all our associations with children's stories and miniature arks with animal action figures and pretty rainbows, it's time to see this story for what it is—a story of horror, and grief, commitment and promise. Because Noah has a message for us, as we confront our own flood of human-induced ecological devastation, and search for hope amid the ruins.

The story begins in horror and grief. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” Wali Fejo, an indigenous Australian commentator on this text, explains that “God...suffers because this evil violates the sacred, the Earth where God is present. The ‘sorry’ of God is the deep hurt God feels because of a deep hurt in the Earth.” Fejo adds, “The suffering of God in the flood anticipates the suffering of God in the crucifixion.”<sup>2</sup>

The pain of the Earth suffering under human dominion is powerfully described by the Apostle Paul in our Romans text for today. This passage, which exudes both pathos and hope,

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<sup>1</sup> Norman C. Habel, “Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 41. In this quote, I substituted the English translation “Earth” for the Hebrew word *erets*, which Habel uses.

<sup>2</sup> Wali Fejo, “The Voice of the Earth: An Indigenous Reading of Genesis 9,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, 142.

has one central theme—that is, human beings and non-human creation share a common fate—our destiny is intertwined with the destiny of the entire creation. In fact, Paul strongly suggests that the destiny of the earth is dependent upon the moral responsibility of the human creatures which God made to care for the earth.<sup>3</sup> Hear again Romans 8:19-21:

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from the bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

The passage ends on a note of hope, but a question hangs over the text like a cloud—creation is waiting for the revealing of the children of God—Earth is groaning in labor pains awaiting the birth of a new humanity modeled after the likeness of the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ—but will this new, graced humanity, a humanity capable of partnering with God to release the creation from its bondage to decay, really materialize? Will creation’s hope be fulfilled?<sup>4</sup>

The story of the flood is the climactic moment in a downward spiral of events that came after God’s creation of the “very good” Earth. The transgression of Adam and Eve is followed by the first murder committed by Cain. Violence is introduced into God’s world. By the sixth chapter of Genesis, God who once “saw” that everything was very good now “sees” that the earth is corrupt, or “destroyed” to use a better translation.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the human story in the Bible, the entire project of God’s creation is already in extreme jeopardy. The question looming over this text is, “will life continue?”

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<sup>3</sup> Brendan Byrne, SJ, “Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8:18-22,” in *Readings From The Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman Habel (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 197.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Gardner, “Ecojustice: A Study of Genesis 6:11-13,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, 118-119.

That question is our question; it is the question that brings us together in this time and place. Will life as we know it on Earth continue? The grief God feels in the time of Noah is our grief, as we see the earth being destroyed at human hands, as we see the sea levels rising, and know the pain of countless life forms disappearing before our very eyes. In addition, we grieve for the injustices that multiply across the globe as the climate changes due to human emissions of greenhouse gases. It is both ironic and extraordinarily unfair that the people on this planet who are the least responsible for global warming will be the most impacted by it. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in their Fourth Assessment Report released last year, noted that poor communities will be especially vulnerable to climate change because they have more limited abilities to adapt to the changes and are more dependent on climate-sensitive resources like local water and food supplies.<sup>6</sup> Africa and Asia will be particularly hard hit.

To quote the report, “By 2020, between 75 and 250 million people [in Africa] are projected to be exposed to an increase of water stress due to climate change.....[and] Agricultural production, including access to food, in many African countries is projected to be severely compromised by climate variability and change.”<sup>7</sup> Throughout Asia, the IPCC predicts that “Freshwater availability, particularly in large river basins, is projected to decrease due to climate change, which....could adversely affect more than a billion people by the 2050s.”<sup>8</sup> And that’s not even to begin to speak of the devastating impact of climate change on low-lying island nations, which will create millions of environmental refugees fleeing islands which are being claimed by rising seas. This is not only a matter of environmental stewardship; it’s also a matter

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<sup>6</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Working Group II Contribution to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report, Summary for Policymakers*, released in April 2007, available at <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg2/ar4-wg2-spm.pdf>, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of human justice—and that is what we mean when we speak of our commitment to eco-justice—it is the recognition that the well-being of the earth and the well-being of the most poor and vulnerable human beings are deeply and inextricably connected.

The famous poet Wendell Berry has written, “It is the destruction of the world in our own lives that drives us half insane, and more than half. To destroy that which we were given in trust: how will we bear it?”<sup>9</sup>

In the flood story, God cannot bear the destruction that she sees, and so God determines to make a clean break, to return the Earth to its original hidden state, in the waters of creation’s womb, so that the old may be swept away to make room for the new.<sup>10</sup>

The story of the flood begins in horror and grief, but even at the beginning, a thread of hope is present. Noah is there—standing at the ready. Waiting to be called into service. According to Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Genesis, “Noah...is the bearer of an alternative possibility.”<sup>11</sup> Noah is the man of promise. You see, God has a plan, or perhaps we might call it a dream or a hope. God desires to renew the face of the earth, to heal it, and to preserve the rich biodiversity God has created on the earth. But God needs Noah to participate in this effort; God cannot, or chooses not, to act alone. And so, essentially, God makes an agreement with Noah. God will save Noah and his family if Noah will cooperate with God in saving two of every species that shares the breath of life with Noah.

The Bible tells us that “Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.” And you know what happened next. It rained and it poured, and the waters rose until the entire Earth was covered beneath them, and only Noah and all the life in the ark rode out the storm. But the tension in the narrative is still building...will this little boat withstand the fury of the storm?

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<sup>9</sup> Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir* (New York: Counterpoint, 1998), 98.

<sup>10</sup> Fejo, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 79.

Will the waters ever subside and the earth reappear? Will there be a second geophany? The ark is not safe until it can touch the Earth again. For one hundred and fifty days, the ark floats alone in a watery universe, a tiny oasis of life.

And then comes the turning point. Chapter 8, verse 1: “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.” Life resumes on Earth. And God makes a promise. God initiates a covenant between God and all living flesh that never again will the earth be destroyed by a flood, and God hangs a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the covenant. This story has a happy ending. But what of our story? What does God’s covenant promise mean to our generation that lives with the threat of rising seas due to climate change and faces the prospect of ecocide without an ark? As the earth is corrupted once again by human violence, where do we find the hope to struggle against the forces of chaos which we have unleashed?

I think that we have to face a hard truth here. God’s covenant notwithstanding, we have no guarantees that our biosphere will survive if present trends continue. Despite what some biblical traditionalists have asserted, God’s covenant is not unilateral. There are three parties to the rainbow covenant: God, human beings, and all living flesh.<sup>12</sup> All must cooperate for the promise to be fulfilled. The earth has enormous regenerative powers, and God is the lure which beckons us into partnership with creation. But we humans must choose to take up the mantle of Noah—to fulfill the promise of a different way of being human. To do this, we must wake up from the sleep of forgetting and remember who we are. If God’s remembering was the turning

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<sup>12</sup> Gardner, 121. See also Calvin de Witt, “Behemoth and Batrachians in the Eye of God,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 296 ff for an understanding of God’s relationship with human beings and other creatures as a three-party relationship.

point of the story of the flood, it is now we who must remember...it is we who must remember our place in the community of life.<sup>13</sup> Our hope lies in our capacity to remember.

Berry asks the question, “To destroy that which we were given in trust—how can we bear it?” My prayer is that each one of us will decide right here and right now that we cannot and will not bear it. My prayer is that we will take up Paul’s challenge to become the children of God that the Earth is waiting for. We can choose to bear an alternative possibility. We can choose to remember our covenant to be Earth-keepers, along with God and all the forces of life on Earth which are striving to keep our ark of life afloat. The waters are rising; we have work to do. Let’s get moving.

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<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, 85. Brueggemann makes the point that God’s remembering of Noah and the life in the ark is the turning point of the flood story, the turn from God’s destructive purpose to God’s redemptive purpose.