

“Building Arks and Seeing Rainbows”

The story of Noah and the great flood is one of the most famous biblical stories. For many of us it is one of the first stories that we learn about as children. Cartoon-like images of the ark with all the different animals of the earth and a rainbow overhead is etched in my mind, harkening back to some of my earliest childhood memories that stem from storybooks and children’s times and even the cover of my very first Bible. It is pretty strange, if you think about it, that such a story would be one that many of us carry with us through life. It’s strange because this story is so tremendously scary. Not only is it a terrifying story of a devastating flood, it’s really a terrifying story about God. And an understanding of its theological significance is not entirely self-evident nor straightforward to us.

The words of the popular atheist, Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion*, resonates with how many have come to view this biblical story: “The legend of the animals going into the ark two by two is charming,” Dawkins writes, “but the moral of the story of Noah is appalling. God took a dim view of humans, so he (with the exception of one family) drowned the lot of them including children and also, for good measure, the rest of the (presumably blameless) animals as well” (Dawkins, 237-38). But the new atheists like Dawkins, who warn us about the great dangers of the biblical “texts of terror” wasn’t the first to be troubled by this story. Both Jewish and Christian interpreters of this text have grappled with the terrifying character of the story for centuries.

In modern times, scholars generally regard the story as consisting of *two* separate traditions, with a gap spanning several centuries. This is, indeed, an ancient narrative, with the earliest written versions of the flood story dating back to around 1700 BCE. As with many of the biblical texts of Hebrew scriptures, this section of the Book of Genesis in its present form dates back to around 500 BCE, and has all the markings of a centuries-long history of editing and re-editing of both oral and written texts by a diversity of authors and communities. And it is not unlike other narratives of the Ancient Near East. Another ancient document, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tells the story of a great warrior god Enlil who resolves to wipe out humans from the earth with a “Deluge” because they had become too numerous. In this narrative, one of the gods, Ea, finds this decision much too extreme and so reveals the destructive plans in a dream to a man named Uta-napisti. Ea instructs Uta-napisti to “demolish the house, build a boat! Abandon riches and seek survival! Spurn property and save life! Put on board the boat all living creatures!” Uta-napisti follows these instructions, and when the great Deluge comes, even the gods are frightened by the horror of it. Uta-napisti, for his part, is granted the gift of immortality, along with his wife, for his obedience and faithfulness. The story in our Bible is different in some significant respects, but the parallels are indeed striking.

In the Book of Genesis the narrative appears within the context of the creation stories and what we might call humanity’s descent into sin, wickedness, and darkness. From the ideal beauty and the serenity of the garden, creation moves quite quickly into decline, as Adam and Eve eat the fruit from the forbidden tree in the garden, Cain murders his brother Abel. And the Lord responds: “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.”

This is a very personal image of a very personal God. A God who is concerned with human wickedness and violence, and a God who even experiences *grief* and almost, we might say, a bit of regret. God's response to the violence of humanity is cosmic. Just as God brought the whole of creation into being, so too does God have the power to wipe it out at God's command. And this text seems to indicate God's willingness to do so. And it is terrifying. The overflowing waters of the flood are the very waters God separated in the creation narrative in order to create the dry earth on which vegetation and creatures could live. The peace and order of the earth returns to a watery destructive chaos, a return of the formless void of the deep.

The text spares us of many of the violent details of the flood, but we can assume that at the root of this flood narrative was the collective memory of survivors to cope with the devastation, the shock, the pain, the trauma, and loss. The same kind of collective memory haunts the many survivors of devastation today, from the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 to the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, and the tsunami that struck Japan in 2011. These communities experienced devastating tragedies in the face of which they were led to ask, just as this ancient tradition compels us to ask: *how, now, in the wake of these experiences, are we to live? How might life be affirmed in the midst of such destruction? Where is God in the midst of a flood? And where is the ark? Where is the rainbow?*

The lyrics of the singer Randy Newman are a poignant lament of the so-called Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, which left nearly 700,000 people in Louisiana homeless: "what has happened down here is the winds have changed / clouds roll in from the north and it start to rain / rained real hard and rained for a real long time / six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline / The river rose all day, the river rose all night / Some people got lost in the flood / some people got away alright / The river have busted through, clear down to Plaque mines / Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline / Louisiana, Louisiana / They're tryin' to wash us away / They're tryin' to wash us away / President Coolidge came down in the railroad train / With a little fat man with a notepad in his hand / President say 'little fat man, isn't a shame?'" / What the river has done to this poor cracker's land

And we remember Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the southern coast with flooding, the effects of which are still ongoing. You might recall Kanye West's painfully honest remark, "George Bush doesn't care about black people" in the wake of the US government's failed response to Hurricane Katrina, and Stevie Wonder's 2005 almost pastoral ballad of gospel comfort, "When the lights are down / And the stage is bare / And no more magic's in the air / There's not a friend in sight to care / Your tears no one will share / I'll be your comfort through your pain / I'll be your shelter in the rain / When your sad is bad and your bad is worst / And there's no who to turn to first / When you've done everything you can / No one's there to take your hand / I'll be your comfort through your pain / I'll be your shelter in the rain / When you've looked around / And haven't seen me anywhere / Though when you were down / I lifted you up from there / There isn't a thing you can ask of me / I won't do / Just you put your trust in me / My love will see you through / When the final candle's flickered out / "Why me" is all you can think about / When all your joy has disappeared / Your future isn't clear / I'll be your comfort through your pain / I'll be your shelter in the rain

In some ways the Genesis flood narrative more accurately portrays creation as we most decidedly find it, often full of love and joy and often permeated by overwhelming violence and devastation. The Genesis flood narrative specifies that, with the ark, God "remembers" (i.e., holds, keeps, protects, and

cares for) not only Noah and his family but also “all the wild animals and all the domestic animals . . . so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth (8:1;17). In a sense this is an act of *re-creation*, mirroring the earlier creation narratives in Genesis, the ark repeating and expanding the blessing of the fish and the birds and every living creature of the earth. Perhaps we can read this narrative as a kind of *spiritual lament* borne out of the collective memory of devastation and the resounding hope of a community that God will nevertheless, in spite of everything, be *faithful* to the earth.

We do not often consider the *arks* that communities who endure disaster, create and construct for themselves. Perhaps reflecting on the construction of arks, may also help us to better see the outstretching of *rainbows*, those beautiful things, that ought to remind us, according to this ancient story, to recall God’s covenantal love for every living creature.

In 2011, south of here down the mighty Mississippi river about 700 miles or so, an intentional act taken by the US Army Corps of Engineers destroyed a village, a little town in the Bootheel region of southeast Missouri called Pinhook. On May 2, 2011, the Corps of Engineers ordered the breach of the Birds Point levee, flooding one hundred and thirty thousand acres of land.

In the early 1940s, a group of African-American sharecroppers migrated from Mississippi to Missouri where they had been told they could buy land to farm for themselves. Although there was land to buy in Missouri, the only land for sale for African-American farmers was a swamp land. With unwavering determination, these farmers bought the swamp land, cleared it, and planted their crops and built the town of Pinhook where they raised their families and lived in peace for generations. When the water pressure began to build on the river at Birds Point, the US Corps of Engineers decided to breach levee with dynamite, blowing three holes in the levee to relieve the pressure and save the town of Cairo, IL. But it completely destroyed the town of Pinhook. The people of Pinhook were never informed or invited into the conversation about the levee, and they received no warning and no assistance to evacuate.

My friend, Todd Lawrence, at the University of St. Thomas made a documentary and wrote a book on the flooding of Pinhook. In several interviews, the former residents of Pinhook spoke of their love for the town, the gardens, the children, the food, the farms, the churches, stories of the place where they had grown up and built community. For years after the flood, the residents now displaced, had sought aid from FEMA, but never heard back and never received anything.

In one interview a leader in the Pinhook community, Debra Robinson, reflecting on the strength and resilience of the community, quoted scripture: “They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings like eagles. They shall be weary and not faint. They shall run... - what’s the rest? . . . and not get weary, ain’t it?” The community fought to build a new ark in the midst of the flood. More recently, FEMA finally agreed to offer some financial compensation, and a crew from Mennonite Disaster Service offered to help rebuild the town.

This past April, because of an ark of love that this community of African-American farmers symbolizes so beautifully, and because of the solidarity demonstrated by MDS and its volunteers, the people experienced something of the promise of a rainbow. While the community, in the end, could not get enough land to start a new town for everyone, they were able to purchase seven parcels on the

same street in a town about 30 miles away. After seven years without a home, Debra and just six others from Pinhook celebrated their move into new houses. The collective memory of devastation remains, but so does the enduring strength and resilience of a community that built an ark of love in the wake of disaster, to protect and honor, to love and to care for the earth that is God's and the community that is theirs. Oh, what love is this! Oh, what faith is this! To run, to not grow weary, to build an ark, and to stake everything on the promise of a rainbow!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the blowing of the Birds Point levee and the Pinhook community, see the documentary, *Taking Pinhook*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pfr8AFpUKDM>; and David Todd Lawrence and Elaine J. Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee: Race, Politics, and Community in Pinhook, Missouri* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018). See also "Flood Thy Neighbor": <https://www.revealnews.org/episodes/flood-thy-neighbor/>