

REBOOTING CREATION
Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22

If you believe in God, one of the hardest questions is “Why is there so much suffering in a world that was created by a loving God?” If you’re on the IPC prayer chain, you regularly receive requests to lift up people in need of intercession, and each name carries with it a story of pain or loss or worry. Why is it, in a world that has more than enough for everyone, that the rich get richer while the poor fall further behind? If there truly is justice in the world, how can Bashir Assad get away with slaughtering people in Syria who want nothing more than their basic human rights? How can innocent teenagers be gunned down in yet another school shooting in the United States?

Those are the same questions that faced the people whom Peter was writing in his letter that we read this morning. Those early Christians had heard the story of Jesus whom God sent to bring in a whole new creation where strength is shown by turning the other cheek, honor gained by serving the poor, and success measured by doing to others as you would have them do to you. They had given their lives to Jesus, but in return they were being rejected by their friends and family. Some were being persecuted for what they believed. People who gave their lives to Jesus got cancer and lost their job, their faith didn’t spare them the grief of having to commit someone they loved to the grave. So Peter reminded them of the story of Noah and the promise God made after the flood. God promised Noah that no matter how bad things got, God would not allow suffering and death to overwhelm the people God loves.

To understand the story, you have to understand how people in biblical times conceived the world in those days before there were telescopes and

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astrophysics and all the scientific tools that help us know more than the naked eye can see. They believed, as we do, that God created the world, and they conveyed that truth in a way they could understand. In those days, before we knew anything about outer space or Newton's laws, when people looked up and saw water falling from the sky and looked down at the sea covering the earth, they concluded that the earth is a dry refuge surrounded by water. God created the world by shaping it from a watery chaos. Modern physics would say the world was created out of the Big Bang, but either way, order was formed out of nothing. In the ancient understanding, up above there is the firmament, or sky, which is like a giant dome that holds back the primordial waters – not that different in essence from our understanding of the atmosphere which holds back the ravaging gamma rays and vacuum of interstellar space. Every once in while, the firmament opens up just enough to let some of that water comes down to nourish the earth. Watery chaos is also below, and the oceans and lakes and rivers are where that water underneath comes up to the surface. In that ancient worldview God maintains the delicate balance of the waters and so preserves life on earth. Now we know that God's delicate balance is even more complex than that. It involves gravity and cosmic energy, black holes and quarks. But all we've learned about the science of creation doesn't contradict the message of Genesis. In fact, the more we know about how God created the world, the more astounding it is that it was all made by a loving God – in ways that scientists are just beginning to discover – and that God provides for us.

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What happened at the flood was that God got so fed up with human beings that God let that watery chaos reclaim the creation. The story says that the fountains of the great deep burst forth from below, and the windows of the firmament were opened from above. That's not just a strong low-pressure system. That's the whole order of creation being reversed. The chaos that God had tamed by pushing back the waters was unleashed. Everything was washed away. After the waters receded and the earth dried out, God started over. Noah left the ark, and God made a promise that such a cataclysm will never happen again. To seal the promise, God put a bow, as in a bow and arrow, in the sky. A bow is a symbol of war and violence. God, the mighty warrior, has hung up the bow. It's empty and doesn't have any arrows to shoot. Those primordial powers of chaos will never be unleashed to destroy us again.

Now, our modern view of physics and geology might be different from the worldview of the ancients. There is some geological evidence of a great flood that happened eons ago, and many of the world's religions have similar stories. People of faith can disagree about whether or not to take the story literally. There is a theme park in America with a life sized ark dedicated to showing that the story of Noah proves that the world is a mere 6000 years old. But whether you take the story literally or as a metaphor, the truth is still the same: God has made a promise to restrain the powers that would overwhelm us.

Sometimes those powers of chaos seep through our ordered lives and threaten to undo us. That's how it can feel when you get the lab report that some cells in your body have jumped the bounds of normal growth, have become

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cancerous, and started feeding on themselves. That's what it's like for parents who hear a knock on the door and open it to two officers in uniform who tell them that their son has been killed in war. That's what we see when a country like Yemen descends into chaos without a functioning government and is left to the mercy of pirates and terrorists.

We know what it's like when those powers that destroyed the earth in Noah's time try to take over our lives. Those are powers and forces that science can't explain. Sooner or later they're coming after us. Death and evil and suffering are still trying to define us, to draw us down into despair and pain. They are the same forces of destruction that God gave free rein in the story of the great flood, forces that are out to destroy us and return all creation to chaos.

That's what those early Christians were feeling when Peter wrote to them. How were they to keep their faith when their world was coming apart? Peter reminded them that Jesus took the brunt of all that chaotic power on our behalf. The one sent from God took all that hatred, resentment, greed and violence on himself. There on the cross the same powers that were unleashed in the time of Noah were unleashed again, not in a flood of water this time, but in a flood of violence and pain and rejection. On the cross, Jesus took it full force, and having borne the brunt of that chaos, God raised him to life. God brought Jesus through the waters of death and raised him "into heaven where he is at the right hand of God with angels and authorities and powers made subject to him." God had set the rainbow in the sky to remind himself that he would never again unleash that kind of destructive power on the earth. It was a sign of God's covenant with all

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living creatures that God would deliver them from that ultimate destruction that threatens our existence. That water, the same element that had destroyed all living things, except those on the ark, when it came rushing in torrents, was now dispersed into the atmosphere and transfused with light to form the colors of the rainbow. That same water is what has given us life in our baptism. In the waters of baptism, Jesus grabs us up out of the chaos that threatens us. He hauls us onto the ark, his church, and unites us with him so we share his death to sin and his resurrection to eternal life.

A while back I met Brandon. He's the custodian at Central Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. My son Bill had recently joined the church, and I was in town for a visit. Having known me his whole life, he's learned to indulge his mother and me when we want to check out a church and see what other Christians are up to. We were making our way around the outside of the church building, checking first one door then another to find one that was unlocked. Brandon saw us and let us in, then he offered to give me a tour. But first, as we stood in the dimly lit sanctuary, he told me a little bit about himself. "A lot of people don't like to use the word," he told me, "but I'm born again." He went on to tell me that he's a veteran of the Viet Nam war. He used to belong to a motorcycle gang. He spent 8 months of his life homeless. Three years ago, as he was getting his life back together, he joined the church and his life was transformed. He's so grateful for what that community of believers did for him that he gives his time for free. All his physical needs are met by social security,

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so he's there at the church 60 hours a week, opening the building and setting up for every event, keeping it clean and in good repair.

As we stood in the sanctuary, he described in great detail the congregation he loves. "One thing I love about this church," he said, "is that everybody is welcome. We have some high society types, and we have people from off the street. We welcome gays and lesbians because God welcomes them just like everyone else." Then he took me to the rooms that are used during the week to resettle refugees. He showed me the room where the Burmese congregation worships on Sundays. We went through the area where for a week every month the church hosts three homeless families. We went into the youth lounge where teenagers find a safe place to hang out on Sunday afternoons with caring adults who respect their questions. We went outside and he spoke to some of the homeless men who had wandered up from the Salvation Army shelter for homeless men down the street. Brandon considers them his flock. That very morning, he was using the church dryer to dry the bedding of a homeless man who had gotten caught out in the rain the night before.

As we finished our tour, I realized that we hadn't been touring a church facility so much as an ark. Jesus had pulled Brandon up out of the pit and given him a new life, as if he'd been drowning in a watery chaos and Jesus hauled him up on board. Those homeless men who hung around outside were clinging to the outside of the ark as it plowed its way through the waters, hanging on for dear life to keep from getting overwhelmed by the raging waters all around them.

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That is what the church, the body of Christ, the collection of believers, is supposed to be. We are the place where God preserves those he has chosen as his own. Except this ark, unlike the one Noah built, does not have the doors bolted shut so no one else can get in. On the cross Jesus threw open the doors of the ark. 1 Peter tells us that Jesus has gone to make proclamation to the imprisoned spirits, to those who were disobedient while Noah built that ark where they were not welcome. This new ark, this refuge from the forces of destruction, is open and welcomes everyone into the new covenant that God has made through his Son.

Last week the newly elected elders attended the meeting of the church council, and as a way of introduction, each person was asked to say why they joined IPC. More than once someone said that IPC is like a little piece of heaven. That's what God intends the church to be, the place where everyone who seeks refuge from the crushing forces that drain us of hope and life is welcome.

The chaos still rages around us and inside us, but it will not do us in. God has made all those powers subject to Jesus, and he reigns in triumphant glory. God has rebooted creation, and God reboots us. In Jesus God has promised that we'll weather the storm. God does not forget that promise. Don't you forget it either.