

The Flood Begins
First UMC of Pocatello
August 7, 2022

Genesis 7:1-16

In their premodern understanding of the universe, the ancient Hebrews believed that all creaturely life unfolded on an earthly plane between the waters above and the waters below. According to the first creation account in the book of Genesis, on the second day of creation *God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky (Gen. 1:6-7).*

God brings order to the natural world by separating and taming the primordial watery chaos. A portion of these waters is corralled into a sphere above the sky; another portion is drained into the deep storehouses of the Seas. With the waters contained, land can emerge, vegetation can sprout and grow upon it, and animals and human beings can appear and flourish. As long as those waters are kept in their places above and below, as long as they are restrained by the Word of God, there will be order in this world.

But...were the great deeps to burst forth, were the windows to open in the sky, this would mean nothing less than a total undoing of God's work would, a descent back to chaos, a loss of all foundations, structures, signpost, and rhythms. This is precisely the collapse that befalls Noah; this is the seething, abyssal darkness that threatens to swallow him.

Even though our present scientific knowledge of the earth's structure is different and more accurate than this, nothing of the symbolic power of these verses to speak to *our spiritual experience* needs be lost. When our world falls apart, when its dependable order is undone, there is always a correspondence between *the deeps bursting forth* and *the skies falling in*.

Oh, the deeps may represent those things held in the secret center of the self – all our longings and desires, our original wounds and disappointments, the many voices whispering to us about who we are or ought to be. If these are the contents of the depths, then the skies, the heavens, must be those external and visible incarnations of these inner forces – the ways we present ourselves to the world; the masks we wear; the roles we play.

This “order” – the tangled knot within and the careful performances without – may persist until some permission is given to the depths to express their true nature, or until some crack forms in one of the masks. A question may do it: “Who are you, really?” “What do you really want?” “What is your name?” Or, some great interpersonal failure, some breaking point, some sheer disillusion or fatigue with one of those social scripts. Then the two burst forth together, rent by the cry of the true self for expression, integrity, belonging.

When that happens, the world as it was comes to end.

We can also take “the fountains of the great deep” to mean whatever provides the foundations for our lived experience. The ground on which we walk. The structures and rhythms that organize and give meaning to our lives. These might be our families or communities, our finances or jobs, our health, our access to food, housing, clean air and water, our political structures, our climate. These deeps, these anchors, they allow our hearts and minds to play in the heavens, to dream dreams for ourselves, to make plans and set goals. They allow us to see and pursue some definite picture of our lives that we believe will satisfy us.

It is equally true that what the world presents to us as the picture of happiness has its own agenda, its own desired shaping of the conditions of life. If in America the presumptive “good life” is attainable only by overworked consumers, then that will shape the contents of our homes and neighborhoods and political aspirations. This “order” – this taken-for-granted union of possessions and possibilities – may persist until there is a tectonic convulsion in the depths, or some new value introduced into the heavens.

If something, or someone, becomes more worthy of our love and attention, the ground under our feet will necessarily rearrange itself. And if some prior condition that we had counted on is altered, some of the possibilities that our lives might manifest will close forever, while others will open. These changes can be positive or negative. Positive changes might be graduating, getting married, having a child, moving to a new place, or converting to a new faith. Negative changes might be a death in the family, a bone-breaking fall, a stock market crash, a global pandemic, *being moved* to a new place. Whether good or bad in the abstract, the colossal reorganization of life and values that these changes require is bewildering. Punctured by change, deeps and heavens burst forth together, and life as we knew it shatters, becomes the raw material for a future mosaic.

When this happens, the world comes to an end.

We might also consider these symbols religiously. Since God is in the depths of us as the object of our faith, and since God is in the heavens, spoken of and represented by others in the church and the world, anytime our understanding of who God evolves or is challenged, our world will end. Faith and religion are bound together. On the one hand, we seek communal validation and expression of our inner sense of the divine, and, on the other, we are formed by religious language and practices and communities to imagine God in certain ways. If the church is hostile to your personal experience of God, or if your theology and your prayers seem to only lead you into conflicts or dead ends, then,

spiritually, we fall from order into chaos. We will enter a phase that the mystics have called “the dark night of the soul.” It is a time of great confusion, disorientation, and spiritual desolation.

The fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened (Gen. 7:11). There is no clearer way for the Bible to tell us that the things we think are most secure, whether in us or around us, can come to an end. Whether order dissolves into chaos psychologically, physically, or spiritually – what follows is a season of lonely and prolonged waiting in the dark.

Now, this passage of scripture does not simply hold up a mirror to us to show us how things really are. It also helps us, because it offers us a picture of how a faithful God, and a righteous person, and a sturdy ark navigate world-ending times.

So let us first notice the timestamps in these verses. The scripture says, “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that very day...” The world’s breaking point is set down with precision and integrated into Noah’s life. Like a tree ring that tells of a year of unusual stress, the end of the world always leaves a mark. It always cleaves time into a before and an after; it becomes a new center of gravity for the telling of our story. This is the indelible mark of trauma.

But here is hope! “The rain fell for forty days and forty nights.” The storehouses of water above and below, they only hold so much. They eventually expend their energy and empty themselves out. The chaos won’t rage forever. God is the Lord of time. These “undoings” are bounded by mercy. “This too shall pass.”

Not only will this not last forever, but we are also not alone in the midst of the storm. Other lives are here, groping about in the dark. Other lives – both past and present – have wrestled with the big questions, the

big losses. We live under a common sky, and our sufferings, while uniquely personal, are still a part of the web that connects us all together. As the waters rise and the storm clouds gather, Noah is not ushered into the dark alone. He is there with his family and with two of every terrestrial creature. Some of these lives will offer him communion; some of these lives will demand his attention and his care. There can be, even at the end of the world, some space for solace and some semblance of routine – daily rituals of feeding, watering, and cleaning. Sometimes, when order collapses, a much humbler order emerges – an order of simple faithfulness to what must be done next, to the task or the relationship at hand. We are limited to focusing on the present moment and our present place.

Endings will not last forever, and we are only as alone in them as we allow ourselves to believe. That is good news, yet here is the greatest grace: in this passage, we witness a final, dramatic, compassionate gesture of God. Once Noah has boarded the ark, we are told that “the Lord shut him in” (Gen. 7:16). The image is *so* anthropomorphic, so humanly tender. It depicts a God who is out there slogging around in the mucky mess that’s become of the ground, a God pounded by the rain, a God who presses a shoulder against the ark’s door until it clicks, who runs a hand along the ark’s hull to ensure that there are no cracks or holes. A wind-and-rain-beaten God. A God who *lingers* until the last habitable moment of creation to make sure that the ark won’t fail the beloved inside.

This is not a God who resides somewhere above the threat of chaos.

This is not a God higher than the opening heavens or deeper than the bursting depths.

This is a God who is *in* the storm with his beloved, a God who is enduring chaos with her children.

And so, brothers and sisters, sometimes your world may come to an end. If something has happened, or *is* happening, in you or to you, and your life just cannot be what it used to be – I know that it is scary, I know that it is exhausting, I know that it is vexing and raw. But God hovers over these waters. God walks upon them. God will grant us a seaworthy vessel for this impossible passage. And God will do this for you not by some magic trick or some distant royal decree, but as an abiding, persevering presence – a presence leaned upon, claimed by faith, in the silence and solitude and darkness of the ark.

The rains will not fall forever.

The darkness is not as empty as it seems.

God may not be with you in a perceivable way, but is keeping watch and holding vigil just on the other side of the wall.

It may not seem like much, but it is enough. It is daily bread.

So let us prepare to come and receive that daily bread which God never fails to give, that we may be sustained in our waiting, and carried forward toward that new day, that new order, which God has promised.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.