

Unilateral Disarmament

If you stopped people on the street and asked them to name one story from the Old Testament, I'd lay odds that the story of Noah would top the list.

We learn about Noah in Sunday school, and he pops up in places like Bill Cosby's comedy routines and on greeting cards and even on the History channel every other week as they follow one fundamentalist group after another looking for the ark on that mountaintop in Turkey.

The popular story goes like this: God gets mad at humanity and wipes everyone out except for Noah and his family in a gigantic flood.

The story of Noah is one reason many folks think of the God of the Old Testament as the God of anger, of fear and violence, while the God of the New Testament is considered the God of love.

But the popular view of God, as described in the story of Noah, is not what is actually in the Bible.

Just before today's reading, we learn what causes God to bring back the waters of chaos and to remake his creation:

"The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth ... And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." Genesis, Chapter 6: 5-6.

It isn't anger, not even revenge.

It is grief and a broken heart that leads God to the decision to start anew.

Of course when the flood subsides, it doesn't take five minutes before our ancestors start right up where they left off.

Noah curses one of his grandchildren and before long, a repopulated planet decides to build a tower reaching into the heavens; they call it the tower of Babel: showing God just who's in charge.

You would think that God might order another round of cleaning up; another great flood, but you would be wrong.

Instead, right here in Genesis, the very first book of the Old Testament, what we have is a God who, in the face of intransigent human obstinacy, stubborn human willfulness and an intractable habit of going our own way; we have a God who does the unthinkable: God unilaterally disarms!

His new deal with Noah (called a covenant) and with all of us down through the ages; a deal that includes even the cows and trees and birds, God's new deal is this: "I love you."

God promises: "Never again will I wipe out what I have invented (that's you and me and the cows and trees and birds) even though what I have invented very often breaks my heart."

"As a reminder of my pledge, look to the sky."

You see, the rainbow is God's war bow.

When warriors in days of old wish to show that the war is over, they remove the bowstring from their bow as a sign of peace.

The unstrung bow cannot cause harm.

And God says:

“As a reminder to me and to you, my Technicolor bow is now and will be forever unstrung; it is now, and forever will be, pointed toward the sky, away from you, away from the earth.”

Such is God’s new deal with humanity.

It is, with Noah, and every generation following Noah, a wholly one-sided deal; with God doing all the giving; since what God has come to see is that if we won’t change then God must.

What is happening is that God’s need for justice runs headlong into God’s desire for mercy, and while God has every right to wad up and throw away the inventions he’s made (that’s us and the cows and the trees and the birds), and start all over again, God decides instead to throw his lot in with us.

That’s why the Deist god, so popular in our country, the god who sets it all in motion and then leaves us to our own devices; that’s why that god is a false god: a faint shadow of the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob: the true God who, from the very beginning, throws his lot in with us.

It’s why the gods of Iran or Russia or the United States, wrapped in national flags, blessing national adventures, the gods most folks seem to worship, are false gods; only impotent idols; because the true God loves all of humanity, loves all of creation.

God, it seems, from the very beginning, is a vulnerable God.

And what a wonderful place to begin our Lenten journey, since for so many, Lent brings to mind a vengeful God, a bookkeeper God, a God who takes note of every sin, every foible, a god who blesses “us against them.”

It is not so.

And today's Gospel lesson brings that home to roost.

“In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee...”

Nazareth is a fourth rate town from a third rate region of Israel.

As Jesus' own apostle Nathanael cracks: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

So it is.

The Messiah isn't from New York or LA or Rome or Athens, but Nazareth.

And thus begins the ministry of the Messiah of God; a ministry that will see him embracing lepers, healing bleeding women, giving sight to the blind and food for the hungry; raising the dead.

God comes into our history as one of us; bleeds with us; dies for us, redeems us.

“Now hold on a minute,” you say.

“Things don't look any different now than they did before the flood or after the flood or before the birth of Jesus or after his resurrection.”

“Humanity continues to create divisions among itself,” you observe.

“The resources of the good earth are often stripped NOT to meet human need but to satisfy human greed,” you say.

“Wars and rumors of war abound,” you holler!

What really has changed?

How are we to look for God’s presence in the world?

What does the kingdom of God look like?

Perhaps it looks like this.

A rich man, call him Warren Buffett, invites his rich pals over for an evening of culture.

Mr. Buffett has planned a marvelous dinner to be followed by two plays: one a tragedy, the other a comedy.

The pompous composer of the tragedy is outraged, outraged I say (!), that his masterpiece will be followed by a frivolous comedy.

That outrage becomes disbelief when Mr. Buffet, (realizing he needs to save some time for the fireworks show), says this:

“I have decided that both the tragedy and the comedy shall be performed at the same time, on the same stage!”

The composer at this point, as Mike Myers used to say on Saturday Night Live: is verklempt.

(If you’re too young, or too old, to remember Mike Myers, think: purple-faced rage).

The composer is beside himself that actors from the comedy will infiltrate his masterpiece, but Mr. Buffet insists: the tragedy will be invaded by characters from the comedy.

Luckily, the principle actress of the comedians is a master of improvisation.

As one theater critic wryly observes,

"Since she always plays herself, you see, she is always at home in scenes of every kind." Cavanaugh, *Migrations Of The Holy*, 64.

(I feel that way about Tom Cruise, but that's another sermon).

As the curtain rises, we find the tragic actress grieving over the death of her lover, because all tragedies end in death, and this is no exception.

Holding sword to her breast, she prepares to kill herself, so that she might have the peace of death: no more suffering, no more corruption, no more sorrow. Id.

Suddenly, the comedians invade.

"Why suicide?" they ask.

"It's not death you need, my dear, you need a new lover!"

Enter stage left the handsome new lover, who woos her and wins her, and carries her off, so that the once tragic actress now embraces life instead of death; she embraces a new beginning rather than the end. Id.

Do you get it?

God's invasion of our world, beginning with his deal with Noah, and continuing through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, doesn't end the tragedy that we human beings seem so intent on creating for one another; but rather, God enters into it, and in the entering, transforms it: with God becoming the comedian in the

midst of our tragedy: transforming fate into destiny, reworking death into life.

God's encounter with our lives is like a master pianist who finds a child poking at a piano's keyboard.

The master pianist sits down next to the child and begins playing over and around the child, transforming the child's discordant notes into beautiful music.

In other words, God enters our lives, and the life of our community and the life of our nations, in ways sometimes apparent, yet often unseen, and reshapes our tragedies into the comedy that is the Kingdom of God.

"The kingdom of God is a comedy," you ask?

What else can it be when Jesus praises God for letting the simple in on God's great secret, while hiding it from those we call wise; when Paul glories in weakness and exults in being a fool for Christ; when Peter finally sees that God turns the world's wisdom on it's ear; they are all applauding the comedy of God penetrating our tragedy, and in that penetration, transforming all that is.

Leaving us to wonder about the rainbow: God's Technicolor bow, forever reminding us that, no matter the rains that come, God never leaves us alone.

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