

Our planet: Genesis 9:18-17

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by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

On the island of Hawaii, you can hike across an active volcano. It doesn't look a bit like the models I made in grade school, where a triangular papier-mâché mountain spouted dry ice smoke and red yarn lava from a small hole at the top. No, this volcano is an enormous crater whose hot lava spills underground and pours into the sea. The surface of the crater is hardened lava rock. That's why you can walk across an active volcano. Very carefully.

"I feel like I'm walking on the moon." My family and I heard people say this over and over again when we were on the volcano, and we all agreed. It's not as if any of us have actually been to the moon, but the steaming sharp black lava rock was so foreign that it seemed logical that it had to be from another planet. But here it was on *our* planet.

Apparently NASA agreed with us. Decades before, they had simulated their moon landings in this volcano. Astronauts practiced walking on the crater's black lava rock in their space suits, pretending they were on the moon, so that when they got to the real moon, it would not be quite as strange.

That same lava rock pops up across the island in a very different form on a famous black beach. That beach looks exactly like your postcard vision of Hawaii, except that the sand is absolutely black. Again, it looks like a beach from another planet, but here it is on our planet.

In the book of Genesis, God makes a covenant with Noah. "Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." But did God keep that promise? I have seen many floods destroy pieces of the earth, not to mention volcanoes, hurricanes and tornadoes. Was God

promising to do away with all floods, or just the kinds of floods that destroy everything that isn't on an ark? Was God speaking only of floods, or about all the natural disasters that can destroy the earth? Just what are we being promised here?

There was an important moment in volcano history when the scientific community stopped focusing on volcanoes only after they erupted and devoted themselves to studying them beforehand as well. They learned that there are signs that warn us when volcanoes are about to erupt. Volcano-hiking tourists are relieved to know that these signs are being carefully monitored day after day. As one Hawaiian volcanologist told us, "We have accurately predicted 36 out of the last 30 eruptions." So they didn't miss any, but they did evacuate people for what turned out to be no reason. Better safe than sorry.

For the people in Noah's day, there was no scientific warning of a natural disaster, just a crazy man building an ark on the basis of God's warning that a flood was coming. Nobody wanted to be a part of that evacuation. There was nothing to fear for those who weren't on God's phone tree.

But then the rain came, and most of the world perished. Noah's evacuation of animals and family members took them on a watery journey to what must have seemed like they were on another planet. Water, like lava, can cover the entire land and render it unrecognizable and uninhabitable. Who would want a world like that?

Apparently God does. All the things that we call disasters today are still a part of God's creation. What causes pain at one end of the earth may allow blossoming and growth somewhere else.

Let's remember what God promised:

As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

Clearly God was not promising to eliminate natural disasters. But perhaps God was trying to put into some perspective the ones that would come. They were to be

understood not as punishments from above, but as part of the life cycle here below.

That day in Hawaii, as I hiked across hardened lava, I finally grew used to the terrain enough so that I could stop looking at my feet and look up to the sky around me. At just that moment, a rainbow arced across the horizon. A sign of God's covenant not to destroy the world was right on top of a volcano, a potential force of destruction.

What a strange world it is, where we creatures travel great lengths to walk across an active volcano. Why don't we stay home? Why don't we play it safe? Where did Noah ever get the courage to load up that ark and venture off into a strange new watery world?

I recall that the promise God made was not just with human beings but with the animals as well, with all the creatures. Later that week, as my daughter played on the black sand of the black beach, a beautiful sea turtle crawled to shore to bathe in the sun and receive the admiration of human visitors. We were on turtle turf now, walking on sand that had once been red-hot lava. It felt like another planet, but it was ours, created by an extraordinary God.