

After the flood

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While I know better than to try too hard to harmonize the lectionary's different texts, today's readings strike me as having an undeniable relationship.

After the great flood God makes a promise, a covenant, with Noah. The visible symbols of the promise are a rainbow (Gen. 9:13) and a dove (8:8). The epistle somehow connects the Old Testament reading (the flood as a prefiguring of baptism) and the gospel (the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus). In the gospel, we encounter the temptation of Jesus in its briefest form.

The connections across these readings are rich with possibilities. Those who have recently received the imposition of ashes and its reminder of mortality now receive the good news that God brings life from our death. The creation is laid waste, but then comes the hope of an everlasting covenant. Just after the assigned Genesis reading comes one of the more poignant human experiences in the Bible: Noah, having lost everything, surveys the waste and devastation that surrounds him and responds by getting drunk and lying naked in his tent (9:21). One rabbinical interpretation of this is that Noah was simply overwhelmed by the pain and escaped by anesthetizing himself.

I cannot read the story of the great flood or its aftermath without remembering Hurricane Katrina. Our community received and helped resettle hundreds of individuals and families. I spent an afternoon in our former basketball arena, listening to people who had traveled from their homes to bridges to the Superdome to airplanes to our city, seeking to make some sense of it all. (To reflect on this event, I recommend historian Douglas Brinkley's *The Great Deluge*, Spike Lee's HBO Series *When The Levee Broke* and jazz trumpeter Terence Blanchard's *Tale of God's Will (A Requiem For Katrina)*.)

More than one survivor told me that the flood was God's will, a sentiment I interpreted as the human need to make sense of suffering, grounded in our

preference for order over chaos. Lent is our own orderly way of coming to terms with suffering and death. The people of God have made this journey, Jesus has passed through these waters, and those who follow him may find themselves submerged in a chaos they had not imagined and cannot now control.

The good news—in each of this week's texts—is the promise of God, which takes the form of a covenant. In Lent we wander with Jesus through 40 days, remembering his baptism and our own. All that the flood represents—the storm, the struggle, the suffering—is also part of a larger story. 1 Peter reminds the early Christians and us that "baptism, which [the flood] prefigures, now saves you" (3:21).

We live in the wilderness for a season, and yet we are bound for the promised land. We remember that we are dust and that to dust we shall return, yet we believe that we shall be raised from death to a new life. All around us is devastation, and yet we look toward a new heaven and a new earth. These are the promises of God that sustain us through the long days of Lent.