

Making violence false

By [Paul Nuechterlein](#)

February 15, 2015

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Nuechterlein's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Lent began as a time of preparation for the covenant of baptism. The Year B Lenten readings very much ring out this theme of covenant, starting this Sunday with the covenant with Noah and its interpretation in 1 Peter as the covenant of baptism. The coming weeks feature the covenants with Abraham and with Moses and finally the covenant written upon our hearts in Jeremiah 31. Developing the theme of covenant might be an edifying way to let these Lenten scripture readings prepare congregations for Holy Week—especially the high drama of the Easter Vigil, centered on the waters of baptism.

In [my lectionary column for this week](#), I elaborate on covenant as God's faithful relationship with humankind over time and space, a relationship that is constantly making and remaking humankind both as individuals and collectively as a species. In short, the biblical revelation is as anthropological as it is theological, because it is about covenant relationship between God and human beings.

Since the Reformation, theology has increasingly focused on individuals, and salvation has been conceived of mostly on the personal level. Accounts of sin tend to be moralistic. But as this week's Gospel reading informs us, Jesus came proclaiming the good news of God's reign coming near. This points primarily to the collective, communal level of who we are as human beings—and to Jesus' ministry confronting sin as societal injustice.

Of course, the individual and the collective are interdependent, not mutually exclusive. In this modern era of individualism, however, our theologies often lack an anthropology adequate to integrating the two.

I grew up in a tradition that came up short in helping me to understand and live the social justice dimension. Then, 20 years ago, I encountered the anthropology of René Girard. Girard's work is exceedingly helpful in understanding how God is recreating our species, moving us from an idolatrous dependence on sacred violence to a healing communion that unites us in compassion.

Here's one glimpse of how Girardian anthropology applies to our current situation. Jean-Pierre Dupuy is a brilliant philosopher who turns the lens of Girard's work on potential apocalyptic violence. [Dupuy cites Jewish philosopher Günther Anders's work](#), under the shadow of nuclear proliferation, to turn the flood story into a different sort of parable. He pictures Noah as making a prophetic, public show of mourning in advance of the flood:

Soon a small crowd of curious people had gathered around him. They asked him questions. They asked if someone had died, and who the dead person was. Noah replied to them that many had died, and then, to the great amusement of his listeners, said that they themselves were the dead of whom he spoke. When he was asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he replied to them:

"Tomorrow." Profiting from their attention and confusion, Noah drew himself up to his full height and said these words: "The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been. And when the flood will have been, *everything that is will never have existed*. When the flood will have carried off everything that is, everything that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will no longer be anyone alive. And so there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who mourn them. *If I have come before you, it is in order to reverse time*, to mourn tomorrow's dead today. The day after tomorrow it will be too late." With this he went back whence he had come, took off the sackcloth [that he wore], cleaned his face of the ashes that covered it, and went to his workshop. That evening a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: "Let me help you build the ark, *so that it may become false*." Later a roofer joined them, saying: "It is raining over the mountains, let me help you, so that it may become false."

Our journey through Lent to Holy Week calls us to work on the ark of God's salvation in Christ, the work of love and forgiveness, so that our way of violence may become false.