

Starting over: Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

by [Martin B. Copenhagen](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

*“God waited patiently in the days of Noah . . . in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you.” (1 Peter 3:21)*

Sometimes I’m watching TV news and reach the point where I cannot take in all the violence and destruction. So I turn off the television and try to get involved in something that will take my mind off the news.

God, however, does not have that option. God does not have a remote control to change the channels. God cannot move to the suburbs or close a door to hide from the violence. God’s eyes are not averted. God’s heart is not numbed. We see only the thinnest slice of human violence and sometimes despair. But God sees it all. If Noah’s age was anything like our own, no wonder God said, “That’s it. I’ve seen enough. I declare a misdeal. Let’s start over again.”

Noah and his family were spared because they seemed like decent folks caught up in a violent world they did not create. Although we do not know much about their character, God seemed to think that they represented everything that was good and worth saving about creation. When they were safely aboard the ark, God sent a flood until the world was immersed in a cleansing bath, so that new life could begin in the watery womb called Earth.

I imagine that when the flood was over, Noah and his family, the last remaining seed of the human race, did not want to wander very far from the ark. If the rains started again, they would have to slosh through the mud to get back on board.

But while they were still wobbling around on sea legs, God said, “I am establishing my covenant with you.” That is, “I am committing myself to you. I am going to stick with you no matter what. And as I am my witness, I am never going to send a flood like this again. In fact, I am going to give myself a reminder of this promise. I am going to hang up my bow in the sky [the word in Hebrew refers to the kind of bow that shoots arrows], but this bow will be empty of arrows. I will never use it again to visit terror upon you. I am more sick of violence than anyone, so I will be the first to

lay down my arms. There will be times when you and those who follow will disappoint me, and I may be tempted to send another flood, but this bow in the sky will remind me of what I am saying to you now.”

It is a good thing that God made that binding, irreversible commitment to stick with us no matter what, to refrain from destroying us no matter what we do, because look at us now. All we have to do is take in the human scene to see that when Noah and his family got on the ark, something was smuggled on board with them, tucked away in their hearts, and that is the seed of violence. That seed of violence existed even in Noah, a seed waiting to grow like a weed and entangle the world in violence again.

We do not like hearing that. We would rather believe that there are good guys and bad guys, those who are prone to violence and those who are peace-loving. This story reminds us that sin—if we can dust off that old word—was in Noah and is in us, even in the good guys.

Before a child is baptized in our congregation, I meet with the family to talk about baptism and discuss the service. Parents often ask about the affirmation that baptism offers forgiveness of sin. One can understand this affirmation more easily in the baptism of an adult, but it seems a strange gift to offer an infant. After all, an infant has had little opportunity for sin, and it may be some time before that sin is manifest. But it's there all right. A seed of violence is already there, as if nestled in the genes. It was in Noah—and it is in us, as becomes clear sooner or later. That is why Reinhold Niebuhr wondered how anyone could doubt the doctrine of original sin—it is, he said, the only Christian doctrine that is verifiable by observation.

When we approach the waters of baptism we remember Noah and the flood. Both the flood story and a baptism remind us that we stand in need of God's cleansing. In baptism God says, “Let's start over,” but this time, let's do it one person at a time. In baptism God confronts sin no longer by threatening death, but by offering life.

In baptism we are invited to wade into the same waters that swept away our ancestors in Noah's time, because Jesus has gone before us and calls out, “Come on in, the water's fine! It has been blessed by my presence. Come back to the womb so that you can be created anew. Violence may still reside in your heart, but I am there also, and I will prevail. My graceful ways are more persistent than anything you may do. And if you need a reminder of this, you do not need to look into the distant sky, because the reminder is dripping from your forehead. This is my new covenant with

you. Go where you will, do whatever you will. Try as others might to threaten you, try as you might to abandon me, I will never leave your side. You are mine.”