Washing away, washing up

by Miroslav Volf in the August 25, 1999 issue

I saw my wife, Judy, cringe the first time she read the children's book *Noah's Ark* to our son, Nathanael. "A long time ago there lived a man called Noah. Noah was a good man, who trusted in God. There were also many wicked people in the world. God wanted to punish the wicked people, so he said to Noah, 'I shall make a flood of water and wash all the wicked people away.'" On the slight grimace which appeared on her face as she read about "washing people away" was written: "How destructive and cruel of God! How inappropriate to expose an infant to such violence!"

In Nathanael's growing library, an alternative was available to what seemed like an account of divine "global cleansing." *The Greedy Python* is about a giant snake with a monstrous appetite, who gobbled up all the animals, from mouse to elephant, and then coughed them up again because he felt too sick afterward. But, the story ends, "He hadn't learned a single thing: His greed was quite astonishing. He saw his own tail, long and curved, and thought that lunch was being served. He closed his jaws on his own rear, then swallowed hard . . . and disappeared!"

Now there, you may think, is a story about victory over evil that you can read to your children without offending your own moral sensibilities and assaulting their innocence. Evil implodes on itself and self-destructs. What is more, the convenient idea has the backing of some respectable biblical scholars. Commenting on the proper understanding of God's wrath, one of them has argued: "For Paul the impersonal character of the wrath [of God] was important; it relieved him of the necessity of attributing wrath directly to God, it transformed the wrath from an attribute of God into the name for a process which sinners bring upon themselves."

As it turns out, however, biblical scholars who make this argument are plain wrong. In Paul, as in the rest of the Bible, wrath is not impersonal, but clearly has its origin in God (cf. Rom. 3:5; 9:22; 12:19). Indeed, Paul's central claims that God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5) and that we were reconciled to God "while we were enemies" (Rom. 5:10), which seem incompatible with God's wrath, in fact presuppose it.

Reconciliation and justification do not issue from some mushy sentiment that shrugs the shoulders and turns a blind eye. Reconciliation is not "inclusion" of the enemy; justification is not "acceptance" of injustice. Essential for reconciliation and justification is the twin belief that 1) restoration of communion with the evildoer does not rest (*cannot* rest!) simply on the justice done but that 2) evil must be condemned and overcome. For Paul, God's unconditional grace toward sinners is unthinkable without judgment. A God of most radical grace must be a God of wrath—not the kind of wrath that burns against evildoers until they prove worthy of being loved, but the kind that resists evildoers because they are unconditionally loved.

Paul was wise not to share the "greedy python" account of evil's destiny. True, after a certain threshold has been reached, the purer the evil is, the less chance it has to survive. But evil is so pervasive precisely because evildoers know well how to pull back from evil so as not to destroy themselves; they even know how to be sufficiently "good" so as to thrive. Believing in the self-destruction of evil is a dangerous ideology. Evil will not take care of itself; it must be fought every step of the way.

And this is where God's wrath comes in. For God's wrath is nothing but God's stance of active opposition to evil. God is not "a nice guy in the sky," because evil is a cat with 10,000 lives. The God who would not oppose evil would be an indifferent demon who would condemn men and women to indifference. To tell Nathanael that the greedy python will devour himself is to tell him a soothing but morally dangerous lie. To tell him that God's anger burns against wickedness is to tell him a disturbing but morally transforming truth.

And yet, the story about God who decided to wash all the wicked people away had to be resisted. The next time Judy put Nathanael in her lap and picked up *Noah's Ark* , she edited the story to read: "I shall make a flood of water and wash up all the wicked people." Had the bourgeois sensibilities and the need to protect his presumed innocence gotten the better of her? No. She was reading that story in the light of the many stories that followed it in the great narrative of salvation. More specifically, she connected the story with the sacrament of baptism, as the New Testament itself does (1 Pet. 3:20-21). As the waters of the great flood washed away the wicked people, so the waters of baptism close upon the baptized person to put the "old person" to death. But like Noah and his family who were saved by the ark, the baptized one emerges out of judgment into a new life by the power of Christ's

resurrection.

Like the story of Noah, baptism contains a powerful divine no to human sinfulness, but it is a no enveloped in a divine yes, a yes stronger than sin and death. Arguably, the story of Noah itself aims at some such divine yes. For it ends with the promise: "Nor shall I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." And so God decided to wash up the wicked people.