February 22, 2015, First Sunday in Lent: Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22

There’s a reason that flood stories are so universal: we fear wiping ourselves out through our own violence.

by Paul Nuechterlein in the February 18, 2015 issue

Lent’s origins are as a time of preparation for baptism. The readings for this first Sunday of the season ring out the theme of baptismal covenant, with the covenant made to Noah interpreted in 1 Peter as the covenant of baptism. Why does God choose covenant—faithful relationship extended over time and space—as the means of salvation?

A scientific view of the cosmos may be helpful here. For much of Christian history, we’ve regarded the creation as a brief prelude to the *real* story, the several thousand years of “salvation history.” But evolution offers a different lens for seeing God’s act of creating: it extends over time and space for billions of years. This week’s Genesis reading—the first instance of covenant in the Bible—seems to support the latter view. It repeatedly emphasizes God’s promise of nondestruction to all creatures; its perspective is broader than just humankind alone. And it places salvation history in the context of God’s wider creative activity—as does much of the New Testament (e.g., John 1:1–18 and Col. 1:15–20).

I believe that God chooses covenant as the means of salvation for humankind because God’s creativity is still evolving us as a species. We continue to be made and remade as human beings—as individuals and as a species of creatures, the one made in God’s image—precisely through God’s faithful relationship with us over time and space. Covenant is the means not just of God’s salvation but also of God’s creativity.

The anthropology of René Girard has become a primary interpretive lens for me. Girard’s mimetic theory combines a scientific, evolutionary approach to understanding human nature with the Bible’s anthropological revelation—a

revelation that climaxes in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one that Christians claim is both truly divine (revealed theology) and truly human (revealed anthropology). Girard's work can renew our understanding of why it is necessary to have both these revelations of God combined in the same person. The two work in tandem. A revelation of our anthropology is necessary for us to comprehend how wrong we often are in our theology.

The Noah story provides an excellent example. Is the God at the beginning of the story, who tries to solve the problem of human violence (Gen. 6:11) with a violent genocide, truly the same God at the end, who apparently repents of it and promises never to do it again? Or does the dual revelation of Jesus Christ show us that these are really two different gods? The true God—revealed in Jesus to be nonviolent—is distinguished from the false gods of our human evolution, false gods typified in flood myths from across the globe.

I believe this is the impulse behind 1 Peter's interpretation of the flood. Christ suffered for our sins once and for all, says 1 Peter, "in order to bring you to God" (3:18). Christ's suffering reveals to us that gods who command genocidal floods are false gods—the gods who in every culture command a good and sacred violence to stop the flood of human violence. But the God who places a rainbow covenant in the sky, as a promise never to try to solve the problem of violence by inflicting more violence, is the God we meet in Christ. If we don't learn to see the god who slaughters everyone in the flood as a false god of human culture, then we risk losing the revelation of God in Christ—the God revealed in the rainbow promise.

In short, covenant is an ongoing relationship for the sake of getting to know who God truly is, of being brought to God. Christ came to fulfill that covenant. The God revealed by baptism in the death and resurrection of Christ offers a startling alternative to the gods of our origins. The human answer to violence is to inflict more violence to stop it. God's answer to this is to suffer violence on the cross—showing violence to be impotent compared to God's life-giving power of love on Easter, and enacting the healing power of forgiveness in the giving of the Spirit. In the cross and resurrection, God saves us from the flood of human violence that threatens to destroy us.

There's a reason that flood stories are so universal in human culture. Since our beginnings as a species, we've feared wiping ourselves out through our own contagious violence. Elements of the Bible's flood story bear the same mythic

understanding—a god using a flood as a projection of the age-old human answer of violence. We need to learn to read the flood story through the eyes of the God revealed in the rainbow promise, the God revealed in Jesus.

So where in the world is salvation? Why is the world still so filled with violence? God’s way is not to use counterforce, so God’s creative transformation does not happen with the speed or methods we might choose. That’s why the means of our salvation is a covenant centered in the Christ event—a baptismal covenant extended over time and space, an ongoing relationship for the sake of being brought to God. In this era of technology powerful enough to destroy us in a flood of violence, it’s growing more urgent that we understand this. The Lenten journey of baptismal covenant helps us rehearse the long journey of God’s faithful commitment to remake us—from creatures living in the death-dealing image of our own violence to beloved sons and daughters reformed in the life-giving image of God’s creative compassion.