

Blogging toward Sunday

By [Peter J. Leithart](#)

May 25, 2008

Luther contemplated the righteousness of God, and recoiled. “Love God?” he wrote years later, “Sometimes I hated Him.”

It

won't do to tell Luther not to worry because we've discovered that God is cuddly after all. Brother Martin knew his Bible too well to fall for that kind of subterfuge. The God revealed in scripture is a God of flood and fire, whose storm tears down houses built on sand. Luther was right: to speak of the righteousness of God is to speak of judgment.

What

Luther couldn't see was how God's righteous judgment could be good news. The story of Noah tells us this. The world has become so full of violence that God regrets having made it and determines to blot it all out, turning the world back to the watery formless emptiness of the primordial creation. If ever there was righteous judgment, this is it.

But

the flood isn't the end of Noah's story. Noah's ark, measured like sacred space and covered with pitch, is like an escape pod from *Star Trek*, a tiny cosmos preserved to be the seed of a new world.

When

the rain stops, when God divides the waters again as he did on the third day, Noah steps out into a fresh creation and takes up his role as the new Adam. He will multiply and rule the earth just as Adam was to do. Yahweh judges righteously, clears the decks and begins again. The re-creation too expresses God's righteousness, his passion to preserve and fulfill creation. Eight were saved through water, saved to renew creation, just as baptism now saves us to be new Adams and Eves

beautifying the earth.

Paul too sees God's judgment as good news. In Jesus, God has condemned sin, and acted to restore the human race and the world. Those who enter the ark of Jesus, the ark of his body, are preserved dry and safe, called to see to the creation's flourishing.

- Habakkuk sees a flood coming in the idolatrous Chaldeans who would overwhelm Israel. Habakkuk questions God's justice, but Yahweh tells the prophet to stand firm. On the other side of the flood is a new world for Israel, as there was for Noah. By the end of his prophecy, Habakkuk praises God for His faithfulness.

- Paul asks the same question: Where is the justice of God in a world of violence and corruption? Where is God's justice if Israel refuses her Messiah? His answer is Habakkuk's answer: The one who is just by faith shall live, the just shall live by faith. God condemns sin in the flesh of Jesus, and through that judgment God reveals He is just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus. (There has been much [discussion of Paul's understanding of "righteousness" of late](#)).

- Jesus has been instructing his disciples about a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes. Anyone who hears and obeys will be preserved, as Noah was, from the coming floods. Jesus' words are specifically directed to Israel, then in the midst of a decades-long temple construction. The Jews were building on sand, and when the flood of Romans came a generation later, their house collapsed. (N. T. Wright's discussion in *Jesus and the Victory of God* of the parable in Matthew 7 is illuminating.)

God's righteousness is good news. God cares for the world—He cares enough not to let our folly and sin spoil it forever, and in Jesus, God fully shoulders the burden for putting the world right. Not only is God righteous, He displays His righteousness by becoming, as Karl Barth put it, the Judge judged in our place.