

Re-member me...with grace and gratitude
Genesis 6:5-22; 8:6-12; 9:8-17

The narrative lectionary gives us stories...full length stories. Today's story, of Noah and the ark and the rainbow, is a well-known and beloved story. I confess, there's a part of me that wonders what on earth could possibly be preached about this story that hasn't already been preached. But, one of the things I love about having a worship focus is that the focus becomes a lens for reading and seeing the story. And indeed, when we hear this story of the flood and the dove through the lens of *grace and gratitude*, something begins to happen. In addition to hearing this story through the lens of *grace*, when we listen to this story *from within the story of Jesus*, or, looking through Jesus, something new emerges. With a relevance for us in our time and place.

But before we jump in, let me say something about *grace*. Grace is a familiar word. And because it's so familiar, we may miss its meaning. We may miss what a big word it is. According to the dictionary definition, grace is: "unmerited divine assistance given to humans for their regeneration or sanctification; a virtue coming from God; a state of sanctification enjoyed through divine assistance." *Repeat.*

Grace is something we receive from God. Grace is God's...and God shares it with us. We cannot earn it or deserve it...grace is a gift from God. A gift that keeps coming toward us...to us...for us...a gift to receive.

When we look for grace in the story of Jesus, we begin to see it all over the place. Jesus has received and is filled with God's grace. When he calls the most unlikely men to be his disciples...it is grace that calls them. It's not because they're good or righteous, not because they're smart and successful, not because they have a lot of influence. He calls these ordinary nobodies because, by grace, they are God's beloved somebodies! Filled with grace, Jesus walked from place to place, spreading grace. His touch, his eye contact, his words, his body

and being saying: “God loves you. You are God’s. You are already forgiven.” When people encountered Jesus, they were transformed. They were healed, liberated, saved when they opened themselves and received God’s unmerited love and forgiveness. Though to be sure, not everyone was...or is...open to receiving God’s grace.

So, with our eyes and ears listening for grace, let’s turn again to the story of the ark and the flood and the bow. Where is God’s grace in this story? Where do we see God’s unmerited love and forgiveness? *Pause for responses....*

Saving Noah isn’t exactly an act of grace. Noah was righteous...he earned his place in the ark. There’s no grace in the flood. The rainbow? That seems more like regret. In the covenant? Perhaps there’s grace in the one-party covenant...in God saying, “I’m doing this” without any response or commitment from us.

It may feel distressing to say there’s no grace in the flood story. Or heretical? That I’m questioning God? If that feeling is there, pay attention to it. And...it’s a good time to remind ourselves that we’re reading and hearing these stories *through the person of Jesus*. And the person of Jesus was constantly re-interpreting Scripture. With his teachings and actions and being, he was saying, implicitly and explicitly, “You thought God is a God that demands sacrifice but I’m telling you, God is a God of mercy. God is a God of grace.” And again and again, he would re-tell the stories of Scripture, and tell new stories and parables that revealed a God of grace and love and mercy and forgiveness.

At the heart of the flood story is redemptive violence. The way the flood story is told is that the only way God could make things right is by killing everything and starting over. Not only is it a story that assigns violence to God...a violence that exterminates all of creation...but the way this story is told implies that when, at creation, God said, “It is good,” at the end of each day, God was mistaken. Or that God didn’t really know what God had

created. It isn't that God was at some point in time a capricious god and then, through time, became a merciful and gracious God. No. It's that our human understanding of God has been changing through time. And as Christians, we trust that Jesus is the most complete revelation of God. So we read and interpret all Scripture through the lens of Jesus, through his life and passion and resurrection.

So how have Scripture and Jesus re-interpreted the flood story? One of the places we hear the story being re-told is in the story of Moses and the Exodus. The basket that protected baby Moses was an ark. The same word as the ark in the flood. The story is deliberately remembering Noah. And this ark saved Moses from violence, a violence that was exterminating baby boys. The violence, the mass murder in this story wasn't assigned to God; rather, it was rightly assigned to humans.

When Moses becomes an adult, he will deliver his people from violence. In that story, rather than a flood, the Hebrew people go through the waters of the Red Sea. While there's no ark to protect them, a path opens up with walls of water on either side. And their enemies are the ones swept up and killed when the path closes in on them. Notice, however, that they aren't delivered into the promised land. Instead, they wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

Another story in the Bible that re-tells and re-interprets the flood is the story of Jesus' baptism. When Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, there's no ark or wall of water. Instead, the passing through water is a ritual enactment. And when Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open, not with floodwaters, but with the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God in the form of a dove. The dove, we are being reminded, was the sign for Noah that it was safe to leave the ark. And we're also reminded that the Spirit of God was hovering over the chaos at creation. This story, told with unmistakable signs from earlier stories, reveals the grace of

God. We see God coming to us. God breaks open the heavens to get to us. God opens the heavens to claim us, “You are my beloved; in you I take great delight.” And in the wake of God’s grace are new creations.

But that isn’t the end of the story. The dove descends on Jesus, fills Jesus with the Spirit and breath and grace of God. And then, rather than a rainbow and a promise of safety, the Spirit of God sends Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. We are meant to remember the 40 days and nights that Noah and his family and the creatures were inside the ark. But instead of being inside an ark like Noah and Moses, Jesus is exposed...completely exposed to the elements, no protection from the chaos of the wilderness. There is no ark to cover Jesus. There is no ark to shelter him. There is no ark to keep Jesus from harm. And yet. And yet what we cannot miss is that Jesus is covered with God’s grace. He is wrapped, from head to toe, inside and out, wrapped securely in his identity as God’s. He is God’s. He is God’s beloved. And in the security of that being and belonging, we understand that there is, in fact, an ark: the ark of grace. He is held securely in the ark of God’s love and grace, in God’s aliveness and creativity. And he is sustained.

Some years ago I was at a retreat with James Findlay on the spirituality of healing. He talked about healing from suffering, how God’s love heals us. He talked about his own suffering, growing up in a home with a violent father. Then escaping to the Abbey of Gethsemani where Thomas Merton was his spiritual director. And where he was sexually abused by another monk. As he talked about his suffering, and the suffering of the world, he said, “There is no place we can go that suffering cannot find us.” And then added, “God’s love protects us from nothing. God’s love sustains us from everything.” In the wilderness, the ark of God’s love protected Jesus from nothing...and the ark of grace sustained him

from everything. Unlike Noah and Moses who, in time, left their arks, Jesus never left the ark of God's grace.

Let's look at one more story that reveals a God of grace, rather than the god of sacrificial violence we see in the flood: the story of Jesus' passion. Through the cross, we see God's rainbow and hear God's promise with new eyes and ears. When the storm waters in Jerusalem were rising, Jesus was the righteous man. And. And he was the one washed away. He was the one destroyed by the angry waters of human violence. The ark of God's grace and love didn't keep Jesus from being killed. But God's grace...God's love...God's aliveness...God's creativity sustained him. In the face of the angry mob, Jesus was wrapped in God's love. He was so sustained by God's grace that he stood, undefended, extending love and forgiveness to those who were shaming him, mocking him, killing him. In response to the chaos of human violence, Jesus, son of God and son of humanity, extended grace. Not violence. Not punishing wrath. Not righteous vengeance. But forgiveness. Mercy. Love. Grace. This is the creative and creating power of God's Spirit at work.

Dear Fellowship of Hope, our God is a gracious God. Our God is love. Our God is a living, merciful, creating God. God's love and forgiveness are gratuitous. There is nothing we can do to earn them. They are gifts for us to receive. It sounds like it would be easy to receive grace, but receiving grace means letting our hearts be broken open. It means letting our hearts be broken open. And when our hearts break open, we receive God's love and grace as gift. And from within the ark of grace, our shame and fear and guilt are transformed. As God's grace fills and sustains us, we find ourselves loved, beloved, belonging. We experience ourselves forgiven. The weight of our shame falls away. When God's grace flows into us, when we are wrapped in grace, we can tell the truth about our sins, our violence, our complicity in the pain and brokenness of the world. When we know,

in our bodies and beings, that God's grace is for us, that God's love is always coming to us, that we're already forgiven, then finally we know that we are God's. And we discover that the ark of God's grace is more durable than our shame. And more powerful than our defended selves can ever be.

As we open ourselves to God's grace, as our hearts are being broken open, I offer some questions for us to consider: What stories am I telling? Am I telling stories with redemptive violence at the center? Are my stories, stories of grace? Am I living and experiencing life from within the ark of God's grace and love? Or am I living and experiencing my life as though God is a punishing and sacrificial god? Am I engaging other people and relationships as one who has received God's grace?

These questions aren't meant to be answered, Yes or No. They're meant to be contemplated. They're meant for us to pay attention to the stories we tell, to the ways we talk about what happens in our world and in our lives and relationships. They're meant for us to live, ever more fully, into the gift of God's grace.

May our hearts be broken open by God's grace.

May the gratuity of God's love and forgiveness heal us, liberate us, save us.

And may our stories, through time, reflect God's persistent grace, creative grace, sustaining grace.

May it be so.