

About a month ago my friend Kate in Florida sent me a picture of a gorgeous native Florida plant blooming in her garden. Not to be outdone, I sent back a picture of my tomato plants being engulfed by morning glories, with a random ambitious nasturtium that had managed to grow a six-foot stem and peek out from the tangle. Kate replied tersely, “The life force is powerful.” Well, last week I decided that the life force had been *too* powerful, and I got out some scissors and started hacking down the morning glories. I discovered a lot of pale tomatoes underneath them, like mushroom people who’d only ever known darkness, and I felt pretty good about liberating them from the vines. But seeing the morning glories lying around my feet, their exquisite pink-and-white mottled blossoms wilting, I also did realize that they were unwitting victims. After all, it’s not their fault that they grow vigorously. But their strength was also their doom.

So reading the Noah story today, I’m ambivalent about God’s good idea to flood the earth and wipe out everybody weedlike. It seems awfully Manichean—to be able to separate all of humanity into either good or bad. There’s a level at which that works, because we all know what it’s like to produce something so bad that it just can’t be repaired. But if you sit with the story for even a few minutes, I think that simple, Manichean mindset does not yield much wisdom.

Songs about the Noah story that are written for adults tend to be from the point of view of the drowning people. Jars of Clay has a song called “Flood” that begins,

Rain rain on my face
It hasn't stopped
Raining for days
My world is a flood

Slowly I become
One with the mud
But if I can't swim after 40 days
And my mind is crushed

By the crashing waves
Lift me up so high
That I cannot fall
Lift me up
Lift me up when I'm falling

Lift me up I'm weak and I'm dying
Lift me up I need you to hold me
Lift me up and keep me from
drowning again

The singer feels like she's drowning from the flood, *and* she calls out to God to rescue her. In the comments on the song on Youtube, one person wrote, "This got me through the first 40 days of my recovery." Another person wrote, "Any atheists on here love this song? because I am and I love this song", suggesting that it spoke to her condition even though she's not a believer. Clearly it speaks to a shared experience of being overwhelmed, crushed, and needing help from outside oneself.

Another artist, who calls himself Moonface, writes,

Everyone is Noah
Everyone is The Ark
Everyone has to build themselves up
When heaven's cruel

And everyone is Noah
Everyone is The Ark
Everyone has to gather the souls around them
To feel useful, and loving, and loved

But he ends by saying, when one has made one's ark out of people one loves, and thus been saved from utter annihilation:

Everyone has found themselves at the end of their rope
Looking up at the boat
Saying, "I don't know

I don't know if I can call this home
I don't know if I can call this home
I don't know if I can call this home
I don't know if I can call this home"

So there's a sense of great loss. Even as his life is saved, he is losing the home he had

before, and doesn't know if he'll be at home in the new world.

These contemporary takes on the Noah story suggest to me that the story speaks to us, not as the good and virtuous ones saved by the hand of God, but us as the hapless and undeserving, swept away by forces we did not anticipate or take seriously. Ancient Near Eastern people telling the Noah story as if it had happened in their past—as if they were descendants of the survivors—may have identified with the victims of the flood more deeply than they were willing to admit. And *that* makes the flood story make sense to me.

The Flood story tells us that God got rid of all the bad and just kept the good . . . but we know for a fact that we live among the just *and* the unjust. In fact, we know each of ourselves to be a complex mixture of motives and perceptions. That's why I made our Facebook picture a photo of weeds growing in a wheat field, because we're both wheat and tares. We also know that floods come to the good and innocent as well as to the wicked. A great deal of *our* energy as a congregation is directed toward trying to pull victims out of the waters without regard for whether they deserve it or not. I think the Flood story is a way of describing our present situation: floods come and threaten to overwhelm us still, and maybe we deserve it and maybe we don't, BUT the difference is that now we know that God will never abandon us. "I have set my bow in the clouds," God says, and the reference is to an archer's weapon, that kind of bow. God has put away the weapon, and when we see it we are to remember that God is pulling for us now.

A psychologist at Northwestern University, Don McAdams, did some research on people who had a redemption story of their own, who saw their lives through the

lens of God pulling for them (though they may not have used religious language). He found that people who told their life stories as tales of redemption were also likely to replicate patterns of redemption, or in his words, of generativity. That is, they looked for ways to make the world a better place. One highly generative person, reflecting on the lessons of past hardships, said, “When I die, I guess the chemicals in my body, well, they’ll go to fertilize some plants, you know, some ears of corn, and the good deeds I do will live through my children and through the people I love.”

People who interpreted their lives through the lens of God preserving them linked to a surplus of benefits, from positive parenting styles to community engagement to better mental health. But what I think is most interesting is another correlation Don McAdams made with that perspective, which was that people with redemption narratives were well-prepared for the “hard work and daunting challenges” of the well-lived life. “To care for someone, or to agitate for social change, or to try to make a positive difference in the world, is to commit to a long struggle, a marathon in which success is mingled with failure and triumph is mixed up with disappointment.” <http://www.jonahlehrer.com/blog/2015/3/15/the-power-of-redemptive-stories>

The story of Noah and the flood and the covenant which God makes unilaterally, not asking us to change but committing Godself to whatever it takes, is an origin story for us. It acknowledges the real pain and fear and precariousness of human existence, but it describes us as ultimately being undaunted, even strengthened, by adversity, and conscripted by God to be on the redemption team. The Flood story tells us that we are survivors—not because we know how to

survive, but because God has decided we should survive. It is a profoundly hopeful and affirming story about who we are and how much we are capable of doing to perpetuate redemption and the mending of creation. Let us pray.

God of promise, you set a bow in the sky to remind us that you will never again forsake your creation. Make us ever mindful of your promise, so that we might honor our covenant with you. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.