

The Massive Failure of God's WMD

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Excerpts from Genesis 6 - 9

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We all know the story. Noah's ark is one of the iconic images of our faith, popularized in banners and sculptures, portrayed with puppets and stuffed animals. My niece told me yesterday that it was among the themes that she and her husband pondered for the bedroom they're decorating for their baby, due in March.

Our children just energetically shared the "Arky, arky" song that many of us grew up learning. Some of us are old enough to remember Bill Cosby's comedic monologue: "Noah, build an ark three hundred cubits long."... "Yes, Lord...Uhhh, what's a cubit?" We've heard the jokes about life in a boat with elephants and anteaters, cheetahs and chimpanzees, and all their accumulated waste.

We've borrowed the dove carrying an olive branch as a sign of peace, and the rainbow as a symbol of diversity and hope. We remember the happy ending of the story, with God promising to keep future destructive tendencies in check.

It's easy to skip over the hard stuff in this tale. So let's back up for a moment and take a closer look. The sixth chapter of Genesis tells us:

God was sorry that God had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved God in the heart. So God said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."...The earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence...And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end to all flesh...I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth...Everything that is on the earth shall die." (6:6, 11, 17).

So Noah built the ark to save his family and the lucky pairs of animals. For forty days it rained, and the ark rose with the swelling water. Then God sent a strong wind and the flood abated. Five months later, the water had receded from the earth and the ark came to rest on a mountain. Several more weeks passed before the dove that Noah released returned with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak, signaling the reappearance of the trees.

What is completely missing from the biblical account is a description of the suffering—the stampeding animals running in panic for higher ground; the exhausted birds with no place to land; the children and women and men clinging to one another, fearful and desperate, crying in anguish and drowning in droves. And after the flood, the bodies piled and strewn over the face of the earth. The overpowering stench of genocidal death. The silence of a world without insects or animals or hope.

God was remorseful, we are told. At the altar Noah built, God said, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease" (Gen. 8:21-22).

God made a promise to Noah. God announced, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign between me and the earth" (9:12-13).

Lovely. The story ends with this stunningly beautiful band of colors spanning the sky. The humans and animals in the ark, as commanded, "were fruitful, multiplied, and filled the earth." And everyone lived happily ever after.

Well, not exactly.

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We tend to leap so quickly to the rainbow that we overlook what that bow actually was. A deity wielding a bow as a weapon was a common motif in ancient art. For a warrior, hanging up the bow was a sign of retirement from battle. God was saying, "I'm done."

Perhaps the Divine was moved by the massive suffering caused by the flood, overcome by the grief of a Mother who has lost all her children. More pragmatically, maybe the Holy One recognized the utter failure of this Weapon of Mass Destruction.

It takes only one chapter for Noah, deemed righteous above all others on earth, to be found naked and in a drunken stupor in his tent by his sons—the youngest of whom, Ham, was stung with a curse that has been used for millennia by people to justify enslaving one another (9:25). Jump another chapter, and we're up to the tale known as the Tower of Babel—in which out of pride and hubris the people attempt to build a tower to the heavens, which leads to a scrambling of speech and millennia of misunderstanding and miscommunication—not to mention ethnic cleansing (11:1-9).

The scriptures go on from there. A sad and sordid record of generations of war, kidnapping, rape, betrayal, exploitation, repression, slavery. Murder and mayhem everywhere. Indeed, God's Weapon of Mass Destruction, the great flood, was a massive and utter failure.

The lesson seems to be that you can't stamp out violence with violence. You can't kill violence with a bow—or a nuclear bomb. You can't murder it. You can't drown it. You can only hope to convert it.

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I'm grateful to Alan Storey, who preached on this text last Sunday at the nonviolence conference at Lake Junaluska, where I offered a workshop on Truth and Reconciliation processes. I first met Alan in Australia in 1989, when he was 19 years old. He was doing a year of service and gathering his courage to return to his home, South Africa, where he was going to declare his refusal to serve with the apartheid-era army and face the probability of six years in prison. As I recall, he was reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*.

I was living in inner-city Washington, D.C., at the time, with Sojourners Community, involved in justice and resistance work. I remember thinking that I was brave—until I met Alan. He was arrested upon his return to South Africa. Thankfully, his trial was stopped midstream—a development that he credits to the amount of attention it received.

Alan is the son of Peter Storey, a Methodist pastor who was outspoken in his opposition to apartheid. Alan, now also a Methodist minister, remembers saving up his allowance and buying a tent when he was 10 years old. His parents were mystified. Alan and his three brothers were raised in cities and had never been camping. Alan explained to his mother: "When Dad gets killed, we can all live in my tent."

This was not the paranoia of an overactive imagination. The day came when Peter Storey and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as punishment for their persistent witness to racial justice and equality in South Africa, were marched into a field under military guns. Miraculously, the soldiers refused the order to assassinate them. The story came out at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings.

I'm grateful to Alan for his insights on the biblical story of the great flood—and for our warm reconnection after almost 25 years. The other highlight of the nonviolence conference for me was the keynote by Leymah Gbowee, the Liberian peace activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

Liberia was torn apart by a civil war, which involved the widespread use of rape as a weapon and the massive kidnapping of children, who were forced as child soldiers to carry out horrendous deeds, sometimes against their own parents and siblings. Ms. Gbowee, a single mother of five and a social worker trained in trauma healing, emerged as the intrepid leader of a women's movement whose persistent resistance led to the end of the 14-year war and the exile of Liberian president Charles Taylor.

Her call came in a dream in which God said to her, "Gather the women and pray for peace." Claiming that "if any changes were to be made in the society, it had to be by the mothers," Ms. Gbowee rallied the women of Liberia to stop the violence that was destroying their children. The tactic that received a great deal of attention was their "sex strike"—withholding intimate relations with their husbands and partners until they ended the war.

Far more risky was their occupation of a soccer field along a route that President Taylor traveled twice a day. He eventually granted them a hearing. More than 2,000 women, Christians and Muslims together, wearing white T-shirts emblazoned with a peace logo, massed outside the executive mansion while Gbowee made their case. "We are tired of war," she began. "We are tired of running. We are tired of

begging for bulgur wheat. We are tired of our children being raped. We are now taking this stand, to secure the future of our children. Because we believe, as custodians of society, tomorrow our children will ask us, 'Mama, what was your role during the crisis?'"

The protesting women extracted a promise from Taylor that he would enter into negotiations with the Liberian rebel forces. Gbowee led a delegation of women to Ghana, where they held daily demonstrations outside the hotel that was hosting the peace talks. With no visible progress being made, they took their demonstration inside the hotel, occupying a hall and threatening to remove their clothes if the men didn't get more serious about peace. "In Africa," she explained to the international press, "it's a terrible curse to see a married or elderly woman deliberately bare herself."

The Liberian civil war officially ended a few weeks later, with the signing of a peace agreement on August 18, 2003. In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia, the first elected woman leader of an African nation. She was a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize with Gbowee in 2011. A documentary called *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* tells the stunning story of the women's protest. I recommend it to all.

Gbowee, who admitted to succumbing to a "crippling hopelessness" when she was a hungry and virtually homeless single young mother recovering from abuse, spoke of her faith as her encouragement to be a peacebuilder. "Take a step of faith," she said, "and God will see to the rest."

She related the story of a woman coming across three soldiers about to rape a 12-year-old girl. The woman intervened, begging them to stop. They said they would stop only if she would take the girl's place, which the woman did.

How can we even understand such sacrificial compassion? And what do we do with the tears and the anger we feel over such tales of suffering?

Several times during her talk, Leymah Gbowee held up a glass of water. She talked about the fluid nature of rage, and she exhorted over and over, "You must pour your rage into a nonviolent container."

I'm mystified and deeply moved when people who suffer great violence and violation forgive their enemies. "How can they possibly do it?" we tend to wonder. That was certainly the question in my heart during the Truth and Reconciliation processes I've observed—when survivors of apartheid in South Africa, and of the racially motivated massacre just down the road in Greensboro, and of horrendous abuse and destruction of culture in mission schools of Canada told their stories and offered forgiveness as an act of healing.

I'm grateful to Alan Storey for the reminder to those of us in the congregation listening to him last Sunday morning that the odds of any of us becoming victims of such violence, and having to dig deep to find this level of forgiveness, are extremely slim. "Why do we always identify with the victims?" he asked. As people of privilege in the world's most powerful and violent nation, we need to ask ourselves how the perpetrators abandon their sense of human solidarity and dignity to do the deeds they do. And how we are complicit in the crimes.

Yesterday I was with my 3-year-old great-niece, Savanna, at my sister's home in Davidson. Savanna had just learned "The Alphabet Song" and proudly sang it to me. The last two lines were, "Now I've sung my A-B-Cs/Next time won't you sing with me?" I remember learning "Now I've sung my A-B-Cs/Tell me what you think of me." I like her version better.

I told Savanna that as a little girl I had learned a different ending to the song. She said to me, "That's OK. It's the way God made you." Savanna is learning in pre-school about difference and acceptance. Very important lessons.

The rest of my extended family is staying at my sister's through Thanksgiving, and Savanna wanted to know why I was leaving last night and coming back later. Her dad, my nephew Travis, explained to her that I had to preach in church tonight. Savanna looked at me very tenderly and repeated the mantra: "That's OK. It's the way God made you."

On the drive home, I pondered all the times and places I've had to justify my calling—one of them being when I concelebrated Savanna's parents' wedding with a Catholic priest. And I thought of all the ways we human beings have contrived to separate and discriminate and do violence to one another. I gave thanks for truth uttered by a 3-year-old.

The greatest temptation for us, preached Alan Storey, is to forget our identity: "We are made in love, by love, and for love." Violence is a corruption of our belovedness.

“Nonviolence is the power that is unleashed when we let go of our desire to do harm.” That definition, probably the best I’ve heard, was offered by nonviolent activist and scholar Michael Nagler in an address at the conference. It is worth hearing again: “Nonviolence is the power that is unleashed when we let go of our desire to do harm.”

After the flood, God hung up the bow. God chose nonviolence. The rainbow is the reminder. “When the bow is in the clouds,” declared God, “I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (9:16). It’s a reminder not for us, but for God.

Because surely God has had more days of regretting what God has created. Surely God has been tempted again to destroy it all. Because we constantly test God’s endurance and patience. We stray from our true identity—to be vessels of, and witnesses to, God’s love.

But the Holy One has chosen nonviolence, and the promise holds: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.”

Amen.