

First Sunday of Lent (2018)

When I was first ordained I taught religion classes in a parish elementary school. I discovered that elementary kids liked the story of Noah and the Ark. There is a popular song that goes with the story. Perhaps you heard it? It goes like this:

God told Noah to build him an arky, arky. God told Noah to build him an arky, arky

Build it out of hickory barky, barky. Children of the Lord

The animals, they came in, they came in by twosies, twosies.

The animals, they came in, they came in by twosies, twosies,

Elephants and kangarosies, roosies. Children of the Lord.

As you noticed, the first reading today gives us part of the Noah story. The flood has ended, the animals along with Noah and his family have left the ark and are walking on dry land. What is your understanding of the Noah story?

The Bible suggests that God sent the flood because humankind had become so evil and so wicked that He felt that He had to start all over again. Only Noah and his family were found to be in a right relationship with God and so they were the only ones saved from the destructive waters. In a sense, they were reborn as we were reborn through the waters of baptism.

The focus of today's Noah story is on the covenant that God established not just with humankind but also with "every living creature." This is the first of many covenants that God would enter into with humankind and his creation. The final covenant was brought about by the suffering, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus.

This covenant made by God is a free promise on his part. It is free in the sense that it is given by him with no strings attached. It is a promise that He will never again destroy creation as a result of human sin. The rainbow that we see in the sky is a visible sign of this covenant.

This doesn't mean that human sinfulness will not bring chaos to the world. We have plenty of evidence to the contrary. The covenant, the promise that God gave Noah, is that God will not destroy creation because of human sinfulness, that there is no one-to-one correspondence between human evil and divine punishment. I spoke about this several weeks ago when I raised the question of why bad things happen to good people. The covenant with Noah is arguing against the position of Job's friends in the Old Testament Book of Job that bad things happen to people because they are bad; that God punishes people for their bad actions.

The rainbow mentioned in the Noah story is a reminder of God's promise... a sign that God will never be humanity's adversary, a sign of God's mercy and compassion. And so when we hear some Christians say that the floods that we had a year ago in Texas and Florida are signs of God's punishment on a sinful people... and I heard people make that argument... do we agree with them? In my mind these Christians must not be aware of the Noah story, not aware of the meaning of the rainbow, not aware that the God of Noah is a God of mercy and compassion?

What is your understanding of God? Is God more into punishing than forgiving? And what about yourself – are you more into punishing than into forgiving?